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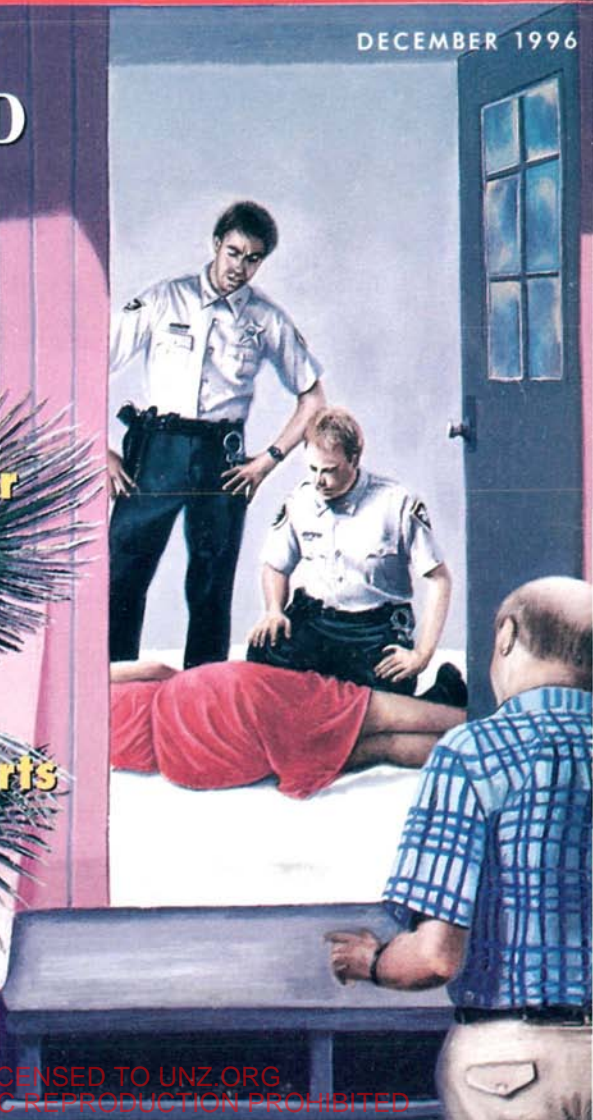
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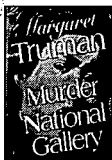
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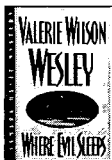
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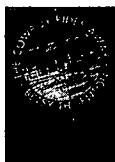
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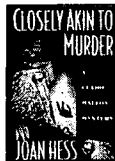
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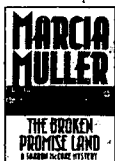
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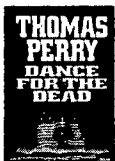
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AHM 12/96

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

At this writing the paperback editions of Walter Satterthwait's *Escapade* ("a delightful locked room caper," *Publishers Weekly* wrote, about Houdini and Arthur Conan Doyle) and Jeffery Deaver's bestseller *A Maiden's Grave* ("a screaming hit," said the *New York Times*) are out or about to be so, and John Maddox Roberts' *The Ghosts of Saigon*, a new Gabe Treloar mystery, has been published. (PW called its predecessor, *A Typical American Town*, "a tightly constructed, elegantly simple mystery.")

Also at this writing . . . we welcome back Jack Leavitt, author of "Heart Attack," who wrote a story for AHMM in 1972 and has written ten tales for other publications. An attor-

ney who lives in Berkeley, California, he tells us he was "described in the January 1996 *California Lawyer* magazine as 'eccentric,' without specifics." He's been "away from fiction writing for several years. Happy to be back at that work. (Proof of eccentricity???)"

Welcome also to . . . J. Michael Moore, author of "The Strange Case of Mr. Sawyer and Mr. James," his first fiction publication, and math teacher at Georgia State. (This first story is strange indeed, and thoroughly delightful.) . . . Dianne Chapman McCleery, author of the very amusing "Mitzi" and a freelance writer and graphic artist . . . and Richard Rowell Noonan, author of the particularly moving "Uncles of Greed."

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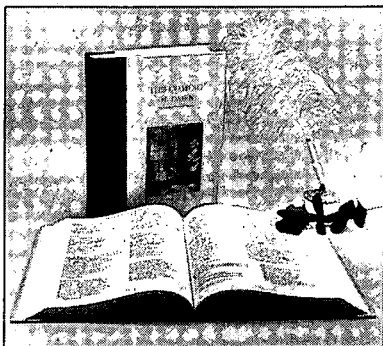
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Poetry Contest

\$48,000.00 in Prizes

The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes to amateur poets in coming months



At The National Library of Poetry publishes the work of amateur poets in colorful hardbound anthologies like The Coming of Dawn, pictured above. Each volume features poetry by a diverse mix of poets from all over the world.

Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$48,000.00 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

“We’re especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets,” indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry. “We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition.”

How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in **ONLY ONE** original poem, any subject, any style, to:

**The National Library of Poetry
Suite 6124
1 Poetry Plaza**

Owings Mills, MD 21117-6282

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet’s name and address must appear on the top of the

page. “All poets who enter will receive a response concerning their artistry, usually within seven weeks,” indicated Mr. Ely.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry’s forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Previous anthologies published by the organization have included *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future’s Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

“Our anthologies routinely sell out because they are truly enjoyable reading, and they are also a sought-after sourcebook for poetic talent,” added Mr. Ely.

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FICTION

The Cassoulet

Walter Satterthwait



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 12/96

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“I must speak with you,” says Pascal, “regarding a matter of great importance.”

“And which matter,” I ask him, “might that be?”

Thoughtfully, using forefinger and thumb, he strokes his mustache. “The cassoulet,” he says.

“Ah,” I say, and within my chest my heart dips a few melancholy millimeters.

We are drinking Pascal’s passable filtered coffee in his somewhat too elaborate dining room. The room is situated in a corner of his apartment, and the apartment itself on the top floor of a portly old building along the Quai de Gesvres. A pair of wide windows, running from ceiling to floor, afford us an uninterrupted view of the Île de la Cité and of Notre Dame with its many fine and graceful buttresses. The view no doubt is often charming; but today a gaudy sun is shining, and the river is perfectly reflecting the flawless blue of sky, as though posing for a tourist postcard; and I cannot help but find it all, as I find Pascal’s dining room, a trifle overdone.

“You know, of course,” says Pascal, “that I have always experienced a certain difficulty with the cassoulet.”

“Yes, of course,” I say. Pascal’s failure with the cassoulet is renowned.

“I have never understood it,” he says. As usual, Pascal is wearing black—a silk shirt, a pair of linen slacks—on the mistaken assumption that black makes him appear at once more intellectual and less corpulent.

“I believe,” he says, “that I am in all other respects a tolerable cook. The cassoulet, however . . .” he shakes his head “. . . invariably the cassoulet has eluded me. At the market I have purchased the most delectable of beans, the most savory of sausages, the most succulent of pork. When I used fresh duck, I obtained the plumpest of these, and I plucked their feathers myself, with the utmost care. Always, before the final cooking, I rubbed the casserole scrupulously with garlic, like a painter preparing a canvas. Always, as the dish bubbled in the oven, I broke the gratin crust many times—”

“Seven times,” I ask him, curious, “as they do in Castelnaudary?”

“On occasion. And on occasion eight times, as they do in Toulouse.”

He sits back in his chair and shrugs. “Yet no matter what I assayed, always my cassoulet lacked . . .” Frowning, he holds up his hand and delicately moves his fingers, as though attempting to pluck a thought,

like a feather, carefully from the air.

"That certain something?" I offer.

"Exactly, yes," he nods. "That certain something." He smiles sadly. "You recall the party last year, on Bastille Day."

"Only with reluctance," I say. For a moment that evening, after each guest had taken a small tentative taste of the cassoulet, no one could look at anyone else. Silence fell across the table like the blade of a guillotine. Poor Pascal, who had been so embarrassingly hopeful before the presentation, suddenly became quite embarrassingly, quite volubly, apologetic.

"Yes," he nods ruefully. "A disaster."

"I have always," I say, "accounted it rather intrepid of you, this endless combat with the cassoulet."

He wags a finger at me. "Intrepid, yes, perhaps—but confess it, my friend, also rather foolish."

"Ah well," I say, and I shrug. "In this life we are all of us permitted a certain amount of foolishness, no?"

He inclines his head and smiles. "You are, as always, too kind." But then he frowns again. "You know," he says, "it was largely because of this Bastille cassoulet that Sylvie wandered out of my life."

"Come now, Pascal." I smile. "You know very well that Sylvie was wandering long before Bastille Day."

"Certainly. Sylvie was a free spirit and, I agree, a prodigious wanderer. Yet despite our many difficulties, after her wanderings it was to our life here that she invariably returned. Until the day of that fatal cassoulet. The embarrassment was too much for her. The cassoulet was the ultimate of straws."

Pascal's way with a cliché can best be described as unfortunate.

"Nonsense," I tell him. "By her very nature Sylvie was utterly incapable of fidelity."

He smiles sadly. "As you learned yourself, my friend, isn't it so?"

I return his smile, replacing its sadness with curiosity. "Surely, Pascal, you cannot hold that against me, my little incident with Sylvie?"

He lowers his eyebrows and raises his hand, showing me his pale scrubbed palm. "But of course not," he says. "It is inevitable, the attraction between one's friend and one's lover. It is, in a way, a confirmation of one's high regard for both." He shakes his head. "No, my friend, all that is history now. Water far beneath the bridge. But I speak of Sylvie. A few weeks ago, I saw her in the Café de la

~~~~~  
 Paix. She was sitting with her American."

"The American is still in Paris, then?"

"Astounding, is it not? Almost ten months now, and the two of them are as inseparable as ever. You've met the man?"

"I've heard stories only. There are boots, I understand."

"The boots of the cowboy, yes. Constructed from the skin of some unfortunate bird. A turkey, I believe."

"Not a turkey, surely?"

He shrugs. "A bird of some sort. And with them, inevitably, a ridiculous pair of denim trousers. *Gray*. Sitting beside Sylvie he looked like a circus clown."

"What was Sylvie wearing?" I ask in passing.

"A lovely little sleeveless Versace, red silk, and around her neck a red Hermès scarf."

I smile. "Sylvie and her endless scarves."

"Yes. She saw me, from across the room, and waved to me to join them. I could hardly refuse, not without causing a scene. Not in the Café de la Paix. So I crossed the room, and the American stood to greet me. He's quite excessively tall, you know. He *looms*."

"It is something they all do, the Americans. Even the women. Even the short ones. They learn it from John Wayne films."

"Doubtless. In any event, we

shook hands, the American and I, and naturally he squeezed mine as though it were a grapefruit."

"Naturally."

"His name is Zeke." Frowning, he cocks his head. "That cannot be a common name, can it, even among Americans?"

"I shouldn't think so." I glance at my watch. Eleven thirty now, and I have a one o'clock rendezvous at La Coupole. "So you joined them?" I say. "Sylvie and her Cowboy?"

"What choice had I? The American sat back and crossed his legs, perching his horizontal boot along his knee, so we might all admire the elegant stitchery in the dead turkey."

"I hardly think turkey, Pascal."

"Whatever. The point is the *flamboyance* of the gesture. Why not simply rip the thing from his foot and hurl it, *plonk*, to the center of the table?" Pascal shudders elaborately. "And then he hooked his thumbs over his belt, as they do, these American cowboys, and he said, '*Sylvie tells me you're in chemicals.*'"

"I said, 'Not in them, exactly.'"

"*Touché*," I say. "In French, this was, or in English?"

Pascal smiles. "He believed himself to be speaking French. It was execrable, of course. In simple self-defense, I replied in English. I have an interest in a

small pharmaceutical company,' I told him. 'But naturally I leave the running of it to others.'

"And here Sylvie leaned forward and she said, 'Pascal's primary interest is the kitchen.'

"*'Is that right?'*" said the Cowboy. I cannot duplicate the accent. You recall Robert Duvall as Jesse James?"

"Vividly. *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*. A Philip Kaufman film."

"Something like Duvall. A combination of Duvall and Marlon Brando in Kazan's *Streetcar*. *'Is that right?'*" he said. *'I purely do admire the way you French people cook up your food.'*"

"Pascal," I say. "You exaggerate."

Indignant, he raises his chins. "Indeed I do not."

"And what did you reply?"

"I said, 'We French people are filled with awe at your Big Mac.'"

I smile.

"And then he grinned at me, one of those lunatic American grins that reach around behind the ears, and he said, '*Ain't all that big on burgers myself—*'"

"Pascal!"

"I do not invent this. *Me,*' he said, *'I like to chow down on a real fine homecooked meal.'*

"'Perhaps,' I said, 'one day you will permit me to prepare something for you.'

"*'That'd tickle me,*' he said, *'like all get out.'*"

"Pascal—"

"Wait, wait! Sylvie had been sitting in silence, leaning forward, her elbows on the table, her arms upraised, her fingers locked to form a kind of saddle for her chin. You recall how she nestles her chin against the backs of her fingers? How she watches, with those shrewd blue eyes darting back and forth from beneath that glossy black fringe of hair?"

"I recall, yes," I tell him.

"Suddenly she spoke. Blinking sweetly, with a perfectly innocent expression, she said, 'Zeke's favorite dish is the cassoulet.'"

"Ah," I say. "I was wondering if we should ever return to the cassoulet."

"I was, of course, stunned," says Pascal. "I had believed us to be friends still; Sylvie and I."

"Possibly your comment about the Big Mac . . . ?"

"Possibly. I was stunned nonetheless. And then the Cowboy, this Zeke creature, said, '*I reckon there ain't no food I like better than a good cassoulet.*'"

"And at that point Sylvie, still the picture of innocence, sat up and blinked again and said, 'Why, Pascal would love to prepare a cassoulet, wouldn't you, Pascal?'"



"Clearly," I say, "it was your comment about the Big Mac."

"Very likely. But what could I do?"

"You had no choice, obviously, but to accept."

"None. I invited them to dinner on the following Saturday. As I said goodbye to them both, I could not help but notice in Sylvie's eye that little twinkle she gets when she is anticipating some devilment. You recall that twinkle?"

"I recall it."

"Well. This occurred on a Thursday. That afternoon, and throughout most of Friday, I pored over the literature. Brillat-Savarin. Prosper Montagné. The Larousse. On Friday evening I bought the *lingot* beans, the finest, the most expensive in Paris, and I carried them home—in a taxi, on my lap, so as not to bruise them—and I set them to soak. Early on Saturday morning I purchased the rest of the ingredients. Again, all the finest and the most expensive. And then, when the beans had soaked for exactly twelve hours, I began."

He strokes his mustache, remembering. "First I drained the beans. Then I cooked them in just enough water for them to swim comfortably, along with some pork rinds, a carrot, a clove-studded onion, and a bou-

quet garni containing three cloves of garlic."

"So far," I say, "the method is unimpeachable."

"Using another pan," he goes on, "in some goose fat I browned a few pork spareribs and a small boned shoulder of mutton—"

"Mutton? Pascal, this sounds ominously like the cassoulet you prepared for Jean Claude's birthday."

"The very same recipe." He nods. "I know, I know. A catastrophe."

"You are a brave man, Pascal."

"A desperate man, my friend. But to continue. When the meats were nicely browned, I transferred them gently to a large skillet, and I cooked them, covered, with some chopped onion, another bouquet garni, and two *additional* cloves of garlic—"

"Bravo."

"—as well as three tomatoes, chopped, seeded, and crushed. Then, when the beans in their separate pan were just approaching tenderness, I removed all the vegetables from them and I added the pork, mutton, onions, and a fat garlic sausage. And the preserved goose. It was while I was adding the goose that the accident occurred."

"The accident?"

"Yes." He glances at my empty



cup. "Some more coffee, my friend?"

I look at my watch. Twelve o'clock. "Only a bit," I tell him.

He pours the coffee and sits back, sighing, and then with a ruminative look he stares out the tall window at the buttresses of Notre Dame.

"The accident?" I say.

He turns back to me. He smiles. "The accident, yes. It was extraordinary. Really quite extraordinary, in light of what followed. As I was cutting the leg of preserved goose, my knife slipped, and the blade went sliding along my left hand. You see?"

He holds out his left hand. Along the base of the thumb is the clear mark of a recent scar, nearly two inches long, still pink against Pascal's plump pallor.

"Impressive," I say. "Was it painful?"

"I barely noticed it at the time," he says, "so intent was I upon the cassoulet. And then suddenly I realized that I was bleeding. *Into* the beans."

"Goodness."

"I had bled rather a lot into the beans as it happens. As soon as I understood what had happened, I wrapped my thumb in a dishtowel to staunch the flow, and with a spoon I attempted to remove the blood from the beans. This was impossible, of course. Already it had mixed

with the liquid in the pot. I had no choice but to mix it in more thoroughly and continue. You understand?"

"Certainly. It was too late in the day for you to begin anew. But still, Pascal . . ."

He raises his brows. "Yes?"

"It is . . . a tad macabre, don't you think?"

"Not at all. Think of blood sausage. Think of civet of hare. Think of sanguette."

"Yes, but human blood. Your own blood."

Dismissively, he shrugs. "I could not afford to be squeamish. As you say, it was late in the day. So, after having mixed everything, I simmered it for another hour, then removed the meat from the beans. I cut the meat, and I arranged all the ingredients in the casserole. A layer of beans, a sprinkling of pepper, a layer of meat, a sprinkling of pepper, a layer of beans—"

"I am familiar with the procedure."

"—and so on. Over the top I sprinkled melted goose fat and breadcrumbs—"

"Naturally."

"—and then I placed it in the oven. During the next hour and a half, I broke the gratin crust eight times, at regular intervals. By the time Sylvie and her Cowboy arrived, it was ready."

"And?" I say.





He smiles slyly. "And what?"

"You toy with me, Pascal. The cassoulet. It was a success?"

"Not a success," he says. "A triumph. Sylvie took a single bite and closed her eyes—you recall how she closes her eyes when she savors the taste of something, how that little smile spreads across—"

"Yes, yes," I say. "I recall." I had been recalling Sylvie rather more often than I liked. "And the Cowboy?"

"In raptures. He consumed three enormous portions. It was, and I quote, *the best goldarned cassoulet* he ever ate."

I sit back and shake my head. "You astound me, Pascal. A remarkable story."

"But no, there is more. Over the weekend, Sylvie and her Cowboy mentioned the cassoulet to everyone they knew. It became a *cause célèbre*. You were gone from Paris at the time."

"In Provence," I say. "I returned, as I told you, only last week."

"I began to receive telephone calls from people—occasionally from people whom I myself had never met—importuning me to prepare for them a cassoulet. You can imagine how gratifying this was to me, after my long and notorious history of failure."

"Certainly. But, Pascal. You could hardly repeat the accident which brought about your one

success. The *contretemps* with the knife."

"Ah, but I could, you see."

"Pardon?"

Smiling, he unbuttons the cuff of his left sleeve. With a magician's flourish, he pulls the sleeve up along his thick arm.

Stuck everywhere along the pallid flesh are pink adhesive bandages, eight or nine of them.

For a moment I do not comprehend. And then I do.

"Pascal!" I exclaim. "But this is madness!"

Lowering the arm, he nods sadly. "I agree. I cannot continue. In the morning, I can barely climb from the bed. And yet everyone in Paris, it seems, hungers for my cassoulet."

I pick up my coffee cup, and very much to my surprise I drop it. It falls to my lap, spattering me with warm coffee, then rolls off and tumbles to the floor, shattering against the polished parquet. I look up at Pascal. "How very odd," I say.

He smiles. "The drug begins to take effect." He looks at his watch. "Precisely on time. It requires an hour. It was in your first cup of coffee."

"The drug?" Strangely, this emerges from my throat as a croak.

"A rather interesting variant of curare. A chemist at my pharmaceutical company developed it. Unlike curare, which para-

lyzes the body's involuntary muscles, this one leaves certain muscles untouched. One can breathe, one can blink one's eyes, one can chew, one can swallow. But one cannot otherwise move."

I open my mouth, attempt to say, "You are joking," but only a shrill sibilant hiss escapes me.

"Nor can one speak," says Pascal, and smiles. Paternally. At me, or at the drug and its effects.

I attempt standing. None of my muscles responds. Suddenly, without my willing it, my body slumps back against the chair. My head topples forward as though it might snap off at the neck, roll down my legs, and go rattling across the floor. I can feel my heart pounding against my ribs like an animal trying, frantically, to escape a trap.

"Relax, my friend," says Pascal. "You will only excite yourself."

With my head lowered, I can see of Pascal only his feet. They move as he stands up. I feel him clap me in a friendly manner upon the shoulder. Then the feet and legs disappear off to my right.

My mind, like my heart, is racing. The rest of me is frozen.

A few moments later I feel myself being lifted into the air. My head flops to the side. Pascal, for all his corpulence, is sur-

prisingly strong. I am placed in what I recognize as a wheelchair. My head lolls back, and I have a view of Pascal's ceiling, and then of Pascal's face as he leans into my line of vision.

"Believe me," he says with an upside-down smile, "this will all go better for you if you simply accept it."

His face vanishes, and the ceiling unscrolls above me as he wheels me from the dining room.

"Perhaps you are asking yourself," I hear him say, "why I should choose you as the source of my—well, let us call it my *special seasoning*."

"First of all," he says, "you commend yourself to this purpose by the sheer emptiness of your life. No one will miss you. No one will ever even suspect that you are gone. Oh, here and there, I imagine, some poor benighted secretary, some simple-minded shopgirl, may wonder why you never telephone. But she will survive this."

We are in another room now. I feel Pascal lift me once again. The ceiling lurches, sways, and then I am lying on a bed. I feel Pascal's hand on my head as he swivels it, gently, to face him.

He stands back, pursing his lips. "And second," he says, "I confess that I have never been terribly fond of you. Your condescension, your arrogance. That



metabolism of yours that permits you to eat whatever you like without gaining a gram. Insufferable. And of course there is your seduction of Sylvie. Her relationship with me was never the same afterward. You are as much responsible for her leaving me as that cassoulet of Bastille Day."

I want to cry out that it had *not* been a seduction, that Sylvie had been as willing as I, which is very possibly true. But no sound comes.

Smiling again, Pascal leans forward and pats me on the shoulder once more. "Please," he says. "Relax. We shall have a splendid time together, you and I. Like two beans in a pod. We shall have enormous amounts of time to discuss Sylvie. We can analyze her reasons for leaving us both, endlessly. And during the day, before I set off to gather the other ingredients of the cassoulet, I shall prop you up against the pillows, and you can watch the television. Game shows, soap operas. Not your usual fare, I suspect, but it will be great fun, eh?"

He stands upright. "And you need have no fear. I will never take more from you than you can afford to give. A pint here, a pint there. I am not a barbarian. And naturally, to keep up your strength, I shall provide you with the most nutritious and the richest of foods. Tonight you will be enjoying a lovely duckling in orange sauce. With American wild rice and baby peas. A vinaigrette salad of lettuce and arugula. And, I think, a nice St. Emilion. Until then I bid you adieu."

I watch him walk from the room, pull the door shut behind him.

I stare at the door. I have no choice but to stare at the door. Inside me, horror boils.

Boils and boils and goes screaming through my brain like steam from a kettle. And then, finally, like that steam, it exhausts itself. I continue to stare at the door. And all at once it occurs to me that Pascal is, as he says, a tolerable cook. And that his duckling with orange sauce is famous. His wine cellar, of course, is legendary.

FICTION

# Mitzi

Dianne Chapman  
McCleery

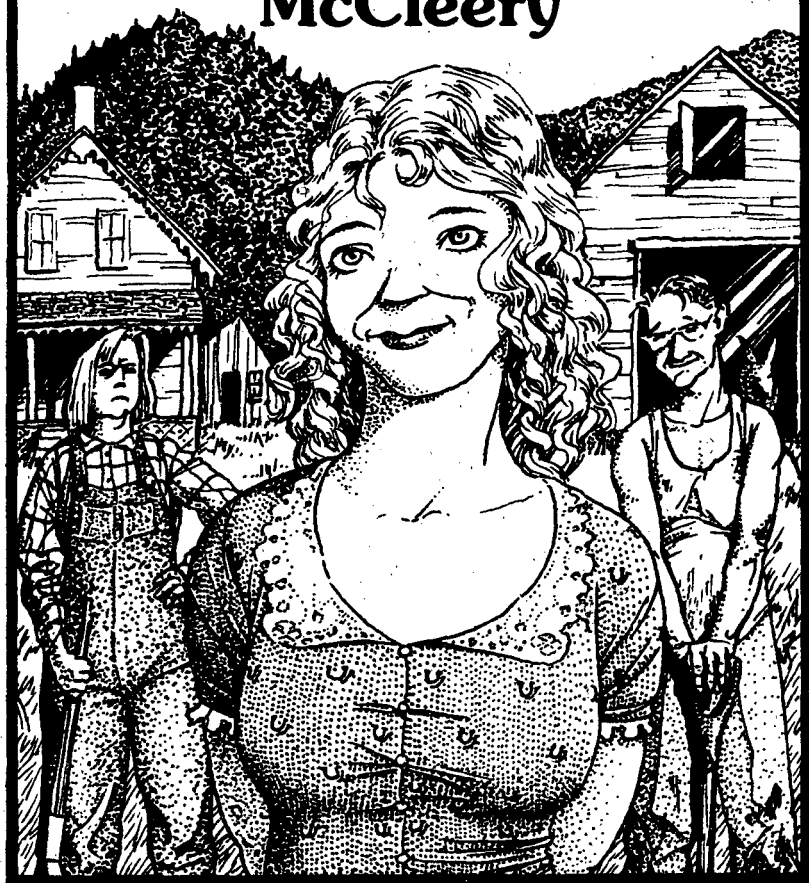


Illustration by Jason C. Eckhardt

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 12/96

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**F**irst the cat wanted in. Then she wanted out. In, out, in, out. This cat was driving me crazy. She was a much better mouser before we got the dog. Like I was a much better wife before Caleb brought himself home another woman.

I don't know why he thought he needed her. I was doing a great job. The house was always clean, and I set a decent table. I bore him three great strapping sons and never turned him away either, except right after the babies were born. But that was a long time ago. He's slowed down a lot since then, but I never objected. Never complained neither, and I could have if I was that type.

"Eunice, I brung someone home," Caleb said.

"Well, bring him in," I answered. Caleb would occasionally bring a person home, a man without family or friends. Someone down on their luck who needed a good warm meal and some kindness before being sent on their way.

Caleb looked a little abashed and went back outside. Next thing I know, there she was, standing next to Caleb like she owned him. Caleb alternated between looking like the bull after he was let in with the cows and the dog when the rooster dug both spurs into him.

"Eunice, Mitzi needs a place to

stay for awhile. She can sleep out in the shed and help you around the house. Neither of us is getting any younger."

Speak for yourself, you old fool. And don't think I don't know what you're up to. I've seen the bulls get randy in their old age, jumping those poor heifers who are just grazing there nice and calm without a care in the world. Who did Caleb think he was kidding?

Mitzi was barely out of her teens, with long, curly, blonde hair, a little scrawny for my taste. I could see what Caleb saw in her, but what on earth would possess a young thing like Mitzi to follow an old man like Caleb home?

"I've always admired you, Mrs. Widmer," Mitzi said as she helped serve tea.

I turned an icy stare her way. "Admiring is one thing. Taking is something else."

Mitzi blushed. I wished she hadn't. She was so very pretty. I felt as old and faded as a hayfield in winter. I brushed back a strand of my straight hair that's always grayer than I remember and wiped my hands on my apron.

The shed was small and drafty. But it was probably better than what she got at home, being the eldest of all them kids and her ma being so mean and her pa a drunk. I guess if she



had to put up with Caleb to get a little peace and quiet, she'd decided it was worth it. But it sure rankled me.

"Caleb doesn't like his tea cold," I said stiffly and led the way into the parlor.

That night Caleb showed Mitzi to the shed and came back right quick. I don't know what I would have done if he hadn't. Probably shot them both that night. After all, I've put plenty of game on the table. At close range I couldn't miss. And it wouldn't have been a wing shot either. Blam—right through the heart.

Mitzi was up bright and early and was in the kitchen before me. The coffee was perking, bacon and eggs were sizzling, and I could smell biscuits in the oven.

I was angry at her. This was my kitchen. What did this trollop think she was doing?

I dropped into a chair and shot her a cold glare. She slid a cup of coffee before me with just the right amount of cream. She smiled tentatively. When I didn't return it, she turned back to the stove.

Caleb came in and we had breakfast. Whenever a cup was empty, Mitzi jumped up and filled it. Her biscuits were light and fluffy. Her eggs were creamy and smooth. It was bad enough that Caleb had brought her home, but did she have to do everything better than me?

After breakfast I went out and chopped some wood. That always made me feel better. The heft of the axe. The ripple of muscle as I raised it overhead. The clean *thunk* as it bit through the wood.

After that I took the ten gauge and shot a passel of quail. My aim was true, and my heart was hard. I had more than enough for supper, but every time I squeezed the trigger, I imagined it was Mitzi's cold heart I was aiming at and just couldn't stop.

Before I returned to the house, my mind was made up. Mitzi would have to go. I knew that Caleb would soon be spending every night in her bed, and I wasn't ready to give him up, sourpuss that he can be sometimes.

I couldn't just drive her out. Caleb might get his nose in a snip and go after her. No, she would have to go in a wood coffin. I've killed many a critter in my time. I figured she was a varmint just like the rest.

I entered the kitchen with a scowl on my face. I could smell ginger cookies in the oven. Bread was rising on the back of the stove. I threw the quail in the sink and went to change into my house clothes.

When I came back, Mitzi had feathers flying everywhere and

was up to her elbows in quail innards.

"I can see I'm not needed," I mumbled. I poured myself a cup of coffee and went into the parlor. Sitting in the sun and rocking, I thought of ways I could kill Mitzi.

We always kept poison around for the rats. That would do the trick. Problem was, old Miss Hawkins done in her pa that way and now she's cooling her heels in jail.

Same problem with shooting her. People around here know I'm a good shot. If Mitzi got hit, they'd know I was aiming her way.

I could push her off a bridge, but our only bridge is covered. Besides, the river is so shallow she could stand up, wade to shore, and point to me as a would-be murderess.

I doubted I could get her close enough to the woodpile to put the axe through her skull.

That left Old Red. Old Red is about the meanest mule this side of the Mississippi. You have to be real careful around his front end or he'll chomp those big ivories near through your arm or face or whatever part of your anatomy is waving around near him.

But it's his hind end that's lethal. Caleb had got him real cheap because he'd planted one of those huge hooves right in his

previous owner's belly. Killed him right out.

Yep. Old Red would do the job. All I had to do was bide my time. One of these days little Miss Mitzi would get real close and personal with one of Red's lethal extremities.

Eventually things went like I expected. Caleb was getting in later and later from doing his chores. I expected he was detouring from the barn to the shed on the way to the house. As if I didn't know what they was doing.

And Mitzi was getting prettier and prettier all the time. She'd plumped up on her cooking and grown stronger with the weeding and hoeing. I, on the other hand, was getting downright fat on her cooking and all my rocking in the parlor. To tell the truth, I wasn't surprised Caleb was getting cosy with Mitzi. If I'd been a man . . .

But I wasn't. And I had had enough of Mitzi. It was time to make Old Red an accomplice to a murder.

I waited until Caleb was down in the orchard fixing the fence the new bull had gone through. Then I went out to the corral and grabbed Old Red's halter. He laid those long ears back and took a swipe at my arm. I socked him in the nose, and he jerked his head up, looking at me from a mean eye ringed with white.

I led him in front of the house and tied him real tight to the hitching post. "Hey, Mitz," I called. "I need your help."

Mitzi came right away, just like she was looking for a way to get in my good graces. Wish my boys had jumped like that when I called them.

"Help me with this mule. I need to doctor his foot." I went to stand at Red's hip, looking down at his right hind hoof. It was as big as a dinner plate, but much, much more lethal.

I touched his hock. He cocked his leg, that dinner plate coming up threatening. Mitzi came around his other side. "Just look down here," I said.

She bent over.

"No!" Caleb bellowed. He came at a run from behind the barn.

That bellow was what did it. Startled Old Red just enough so he jerked his hoof up instead of out. Caleb dived, knocking Mitzi out of the way. She sprawled in the dirt, kicking up a load of dust.

About the same time Old Red let loose. Caleb caught the full

brunt of that hoof. It took off his right ear and darned near scalped him. Amazing what a lot of blood will come from a head wound, even when a person is dead from a broken neck.

We buried him in the churchyard the next day. Sheriff Hooper came out, and I sold Old Red to him real cheap. Mitzi never said a word. I figure she thought it really was an accident. I let her move out of the shed and in to the boys' old room.

Mitzi takes right good care of the house. I've taken over most of Caleb's chores and do them better than he ever did. I like coming in and having supper ready, my clothes cleaned and ironed, the house aired and welcoming.

Since I let the cat sleep on Caleb's side of the bed, she calmed down some and forgave the dog. She's back to catching mice.

The preacher said at Caleb's funeral, "Let us not mourn for Caleb, for in this world everything goes according to God's plan." Well, if this is God's plan, I'm all for it.



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FICTION

# POWDERBURN

**John Maddox Roberts  
and Bethany Roberts**



*Illustration by Kevin Kreneck*

*Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 12/96*

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**O**n Saturday evenings my pa and a little circle of his friends used to get together for poker in the back room at Tatum's saloon, which stood at the corner of Front Street and Main, the two principal thoroughfares of Goodnight, Texas. In fact, they were the only streets worthy of the name. Front Street ran parallel to the railroad tracks and constituted a boundary of sorts. The other side of the tracks was the Mexican part of town.

A few years before the events of that February, the Secretary of the Interior had declared the frontier officially closed. You'd never have guessed it in that little corner of South Texas. Population and law enforcement were about equally thin. The nearby hills were still a hangout for rustlers and desperadoes, and while Indian troubles were a thing of the past, raids across the river by Mexican bandits were still pretty frequent. Old Porfirio Diaz was losing his grip on power down south, and outlaws of both nations operated pretty much at will in the northern states. Men still tended to settle their own disputes with six-guns, just as they had since the days of the Republic.

I was about sixteen that year. Pa figured that was old enough for me to hang around the poker game and run errands for the

older men, although he wouldn't let me drink or take part in the gambling. It was just a friendly game, though, where a little group of the local businessmen and ranchers got together, most of them needing time off from their work and their wives to play cards and jaw and laugh at each other's jokes.

There were four of them at the table that night. Besides Pa, there was Barton McGoldrick, who owned the town's only dry goods store; Arvil Karnes, a rancher of some substance; and Mr. Scull, the town marshal. It was a cold night, and the potbelled stove in the corner glowed a soft red. Even South Texas gets cold when a norther blows. Above the table burned a single electric globe beneath a conical green shade. A lot of people complained that the newfangled electric lights harmed the eyes, but they were a point of pride for Tatum, whose business was the first in town to get on the electrical system. Telephones were still unknown, although we'd heard of them. Automobiles weren't yet a rumor.

"Two pair, bullets over queens," McGoldrick said, calling.

"Beats my jacks over tens," Pa said, disgustedly tossing his cards atop the deadwood. Everyone else had already folded.

McGoldrick grinned around

his cigar as he hauled in the modest pot. "This just ain't your night, Bill." He meant Pa, William Bee.

Marshal Scull fished in a vest pocket, came up with his fancy gold repeater, and flipped the cover open. "Ten o'clock. I'd say it's time for a snack, gentlemen. Are we in agreement?"

"Bernard," Pa said, meaning me, "go out front and bring us some sandwiches and a fresh pitcher."

Everybody tossed in a quarter to pay for the refreshments, and I went out into the main room, where a half-dozen patrons were lined up at the bar and another dozen or so sat around the little tables with bottles or pitchers set up in front of them. It was a standard Saturday night crowd at Tatum's, mostly hands from the nearby ranches and a few townsmen, a railroad man or two, and some engineers from Pennsylvania who were prospecting for oil. Everyone back then thought it was just Yankee foolishness to look for black goo in Texas. Texas produced cattle and cotton and sugar, not smelly old petroleum.

I sidled up to the bar, feeling important. "The back room's ready for . . ."

"I'm way ahead of you, Bern," Art Tatum said. He jerked his head toward where Manuela, the fat old cook, was buttering

heavy slabs of the bread she baked every morning. She already had the ham sliced and ready. While I waited by the bar, feeling very manly with my boot propped on the brass rail, my attention was distracted by the sound of boot heels on the wooden sidewalk outside. I glanced toward the Front Street windows and saw a hat go by. The lower two-thirds of the windows at Tatum's were painted in a pattern of green and white diamonds, leaving just the upper third clear, and through that transparent glass I saw a pale gray Stetson heading toward the corner of Front and Main. I expected to see the corner door open and the man come in, but apparently he didn't have drinking on his mind.

A minute later, while I was collecting the pitcher of beer and the platter of sandwiches, I heard another set of footsteps outside. These were faster, as if this man were hurrying to catch up with the first. I looked out again, but I saw nothing as the steps went by. Either he was short or he was wearing a black hat. Goodnight was entirely innocent of street lighting, and I'd only been able to see the first man because the electrical light from inside had reflected from his pale hat.

I was just setting my load down on the card table when we

heard shouting from somewhere down the street, a not too uncommon sound on Saturday night, when men got rowdy. But then came the heart-stopping sound of gunfire. First there was a deep boom, then a second or two later another shot, and that time the sound was different, sort of a higher-pitched bark. Then a regular fusillade. Then, silence.

Chairs were over backward as the cardplayers jumped to their feet and went out the door, me right behind them. Out in the main room everyone was trying to crowd through the double front doors.

"Marshal comin' through!" Pa shouted. "Clear the way there!"

"You see all them flashes?" a grizzled old cowboy said, ignoring Pa. "Looked like a thunderstorm goin' on out there." Behind the bar old Manuela had her eyes tight shut, muttering prayers and crossing herself like Billy-be-damned.

Mr. Scull was a big man, and he pushed his way through the crowd without much trouble. Some of the men had guns out, and he didn't like that.

"Put that iron away! If there's any more shooting to be done tonight, I'll do it. It's what you pay me for." Everyone complied without protest. Marshal Scull was a mild-mannered man, but he had a fearsome reputation.

He never even made a move toward his own gun. He was that confident.

Outside, people were milling around, trying to see what had happened. Down Front Street, on the other side of Main and near the railroad tracks, some men were lightening the gloom a little with wooden matches. They looked like a bunch of lightning-bugs.

"Three men down over here!" somebody called. "One of 'em ain't gonna last long."

Smoke still hung thick in the air when we got there. I could smell the familiar burned-sulphur reek; under it was a fainter, less familiar smell, a sort of chemical tang I couldn't quite identify.

Mr. Scull sighed wearily. "Bring them all into the saloon where there's light. Orfeo Garza, is that you over there?"

"Sí, marshal," answered the Mexican, just visible because of his white clothes.

"Go get Doc Buford if he isn't on his way already."

Orfeo ran off, and I helped to pick up one of the fallen men. The way he hung there in our grasp, almost a dead weight, told me that he was going fast. Then I saw the glow. The cloth of his winter coat was smoldering, set afire by a close-range gunblast. Even as I watched, the smolder broke into tiny flames,

and the stench of blood and scorched flesh hit my nostrils. I got dizzy and almost passed out, but I managed to keep my feet until we got him on a table in the saloon. Then I ran out a side door into the little alley that led back to the jakes and lost my dinner.

Shakily, I went back inside, hoping nobody had noticed. I'd heard about shootings and stabbings all my life, but I'd never been present when one happened. When I got back, all three men were inside, two of them sitting in chairs. One had a bleeding hole in his thigh; the other looked like he'd been half scalped. The doctor came bustling through the front door, his big leather satchel in his hand.

"Orfeo found you quick," Marshal Scull said.

"No need for a messenger. Like an old warhorse, I run to the sound of the guns. Who's killed?" Doc Buford was a perpetually weary man who seemed to have seen everything.

"It's Elrod Haynes hurt the worst," Mr. McGoldrick said. "But I doubt you can do much for him. He's shot right in the brisket."

"Get his coat and shirt off," Doc said. "Whose face is that under all that blood?"

"Mart Foster," the man croaked. He had a hand up cov-

ering half his face, and the back of the hand was spiderwebbed with blood. He looked up groggily, rolling his one visible eye around at the crowd. "You all know me. I'm Elrod's partner."

"You ain't lookin' your best, Mart," said Tatum. "You look like the Comanches been at you."

"And who might you be?" Marshal Scull asked the man who was clutching his thigh.

"Shay Linden," the man said in a strangled sort of voice. "Damnation, that hurts!"

"If it don't hurt, it don't make much sense to shoot a man," Pa said, coming across the room with something in his hand. "Look at this, marshal. I just took it off of poor Elrod." He held out a gunbelt that held a holstered pistol. A strap of leather was attached to the holster, and a slit in its end was looped over the hammer spur to keep the gun from falling out when a man was riding.

"Why, Elrod never even had a chance to go for his gun," McGoldrick said. All eyes turned against the two wounded men. In those days, in that part of the country, it was reckoned that if men wanted to settle a question by violence that was their right as freeborn Americans. But to shoot a man who hadn't even had a chance to unsecure his

sidearm was nothing but cold-blooded murder.

The marshal sat at one of the little round tables while Doc went to work on Elrod. "And one of these two shot him," Mr. Scull mused. "The question is: which one? Either of you want to own up to it?"

"It was that son of a bitch right there!" Foster yelled, pointing a bloodied finger toward Linden. "Elrod was my best friend, and that sneaking coward gunned him down like a dog."

"He's a liar," the other snarled. "I needed to talk to Elrod, and no sooner'd I find him than that snake shot him."

"Whichever of you shot him, it's clear that matters didn't rest there," Mr. Scull said. "How did you happen to shoot each other?"

"I seen Elrod fall," Foster said, "so I jerked my gun and shot at him."

"It was *me* shot at *him* for killin' Elrod," Shay Linden hollered.

"You're no great shakes as gunfighters," Mr. Scull commented. "You each scored only a single hit."

"It was dark," Foster said by way of explanation.

"I can do nothing for this man," Doc said. "He won't last till daylight. Let's have a look at that leg." He began to probe at

Linden's thigh, and the man winced.

"Maybe they both kilt him," said somebody. "Might be best to hang 'em both." There was some agreement from the crowd. Elrod had been well liked.

Mr. Scull held up a hand for quiet. "Let's not have any of that kind of talk. That sort of behavior was good enough thirty years ago, but now we must allow the law to take its course. There has to be an inquest and a proper trial."

"Well, how're we to know which of 'em shot him?" Arvil Karnes said. "Nobody seen 'em, and they're throwin' off on each other."

Mr. Scull scratched a match on the bottom of the table and lit up a cheroot. "We'll have to examine the evidence. Which of these two had a reason to kill Elrod? And by the way, where are their guns? Their holsters are empty." Nobody seemed to have the weapons, so the marshal turned to me. "Bernard, take a lantern outside, see if you can find them, and bring them to me."

Glad to have something to do, I went to the bar. Manuela handed me a lantern and a match to light it with. They kept lanterns under the bar because that electricity was none too reliable. As I left the saloon, the two wounded men were still

telling everyone that it was the other fellow that committed murder.

It didn't take me a minute to find the two guns. They were nickel-plated and reflected the lantern flame as bright as silver coins. Back in the saloon I set the two guns on the table in front of the marshal. They were nigh identical: a pair of Colt's six-shooters, nickel-plated like I said, with black gutta-percha grips and barrels cut off even with the ejector rods. There were probably fifty just like them in town; they cost thirteen bucks if you ordered them from the Sears Roebuck catalogue.

Mr. Scull picked them up and sniffed the barrel of each. Then he frowned a little and sniffed each muzzle again, taking a longer time at it. His red eyebrows went up sort of quizzically.

"Which of these pistols is yours?" he asked Linden.

"Why, it's that . . ." he paused. "Can't say for sure. They're just alike."

"How about you?" he asked Foster. "Is there a mark on your gun you'd recognize?"

"I don't reckon," Foster said. Then, real suspicious: "Why're you askin'?" Manuela came up to him with a towel and a basin of steaming water and began to mop the blood from his head and face.

Mr. Scull leaned back in his chair, studying the guns before him with those sharp, blue eyes of his. "I just like to keep all the facts straight. Bernard, do you remember where you found these?"

"Sure do, marshal," I told him. "I mean, I can take you to the places where they were lying. But which one was in which spot, I don't know. I wasn't payin' attention. Sorry, marshal." I felt I'd failed him somehow, and that upset me because I really admired Marshal Scull.

"No reason why you should have, it was just a chance." He stuck the two pistols in the side pockets of his coat and cocked an eye toward Tatum. "Soon as they're doctored, I'm going to lock these two up and wire the county seat. Have Manuela bring the unfortunate Mr. Haynes's clothes to my office. She's not to wash them first."

"Sure, marshal," Tatum said, looking at the pile of bloodied cloth that still smoked on the floor beneath the table where their owner lay, barely breathing. "But how come?"

Mr. Scull stood up. "Evidence," he said.

**P**a was a cattle buyer for a half-dozen meat packing firms located in San Antonio and points north all the way to

Chicago. He also had a livery stable. Our cattle holding pen and the stable were located on a big patch of ground at the south edge of town, next to the tracks. On top of that, he was a justice of the peace and town postmaster, so one way or another we were pretty well off as such things were judged in Goodnight back then. Ma died when I was little, and I barely remembered her. Pa figured on packing me off to college in a year or two. I wasn't looking forward to it.

The day after the shooting incident I dropped by the marshal's office as soon as I got out of school. I did that most days because Mr. Scull fascinated me and sometimes he had errands for me to run. He'd arrived in town about a year before. Rustlers had been plaguing the county, and the local cattlemen's association had agreed to hire a first-rate range detective. Arvil Karnes had found his name in the *Southwest Cattlemen's Gazette* and sent him a wire.

He was a big, goodlooking man with red hair and a piratical scar slanting across the left side of his face, but he didn't look much like a gunfighter in his neat black business suit and high-polished boots. We learned that appearances aren't everything. Within two months the only rustlers still in the county were in jail. Everybody figured

they'd come back if he left, so the town offered him the post of marshal. At loose ends, he agreed. It seemed like every week the telegraph brought him offers of employment as a range detective, but he always declined. Some nosy citizen asked him why he did this when the big Colorado and Wyoming cattlemen's associations could afford to pay him so much more than the little town of Goodnight.

"Small, independent ranchers such as we have here are getting to be a dying breed," Mr. Scull answered. "Mostly, these days, it's all big corporations with no more soul than a bank or a railroad, and most are foreign-owned to boot. What they call rustlers are mainly just poor fellows trying to hang onto their little patches of range, and the big cattle cartels don't like competition. I will not be a hired gun for such people." It was strange talk, but nobody was inclined to question him. It was still considered poor manners to inquire too deeply into a man's past.

And then there was his education. Nobody knew how many languages Mr. Scull spoke, but he was handy with any you were liable to encounter in Goodnight and we weren't confined to English and Spanish. There were German and Polish settlements



within the county, and he could speak both of those tongues. Once a Chinese family came through from Corpus Christi on their way to start a business in San Antonio, and Harley Albright said he heard Mr. Scull talking with them at the train station in that weird, singsong language of theirs. But then Harley was a drunk and not entirely reliable. Whatever the truth of that incident, Mr. Scull was, as my pa put it, "powerful learned."

When I walked into his office, he was reading a book in German. I could tell because it had that fancy, old fashioned lettering they use. Every German book looks like it ought to be the Bible. Scattered over the top of his desk was reading material of the more usual sort, catalogues and such. I noticed that he had several brochures put out by outfits like Remington, Winchester, Stevens, and so forth.

"Afternoon, marshal," I said. I pointed to the litter of printed material. "You layin' in a new arsenal?"

"Good afternoon, Bernard. No, I am just researching certain facts pertinent to the upcoming inquest." He picked up some papers and handed them to me. "If you'd run these over to the telegraph office, I'd regard it as a favor. There are some people I want to have at the inquest."

"Sure thing, marshal," I said. "You figured which of them two done it?"

"Not yet, but with the help of these men and this material," he waved a hand over the stuff on his desk, "I hope to know by the time Judge Witt convenes the meeting." He tapped his fingers on the desk. "It is unfortunate that the telephone has not yet arrived in this remote part of the Republic, or I might have had all the information I need by now. I predict that there will come a day when Mr. Bell's invention will obviate much of the labor and travel necessitated by this task. A law enforcement official will be able to accomplish ninety percent of his work without stirring from his desk."

"You mean like a banker? That don't seem proper. Why, Wild Bill Hickok or Pat Garret never would've earned a reputation if they just sat behind a desk!" I was a great reader of dime novels.

"It may seem strange to you, Bernard, but there are parts of this great nation where bankers enjoy a higher regard from their fellow citizens than do gunfighters."

"If you say so, marshal." It seemed strange all right. "But I don't see how reading a bunch of catalogues can tell you how Elrod Haynes come to be gunned down."

He leaned back in his creaky swivel chair. "They are telling me *how* he was killed. But *why* it happened is still unclear. What do you know about Elrod Haynes and Mart Foster, Bernard?"

"Not a whole lot. They have a ranch south of town on Hidden Creek. I guess it's not much of a spread. Pa buys a few head from 'em every year, but that creek ain't real reliable. Elrod has—had, I guess, a daughter a few years older'n me. Her name's Mary. I never saw his wife, but I heard she run off with some musician with a show that come through town ten years ago."

"I see. Do you know of any rancor between the two partners?"

I shrugged. "Not that I ever heard. I guess they kept mostly to themselves down on the creek."

"That is pretty much what everyone I've spoken with says." His forefinger traced little circles on an advertising sheet for DuPont Powder. "What do you know about Shay Linden?"

I thought about that for a minute. "I know he's a cowhand. Never owned his own place, but he's worked at half the ranches around here. He hires on at Pa's stockyard sometimes when we have a lot of beef to handle or load on the trains. Last I heard, he was working on the Anchor T ranch up near San Antonio."

"Any history of conflict with the late Mr. Haynes?" That was the way he talked, almost like a lawyer or a newspaperman.

"Don't know of any. Seems to me he worked at the Haynes-Foster place sometimes. Matter of fact, I remember last year he was with 'em when they brung in their beeves to our cowlot."

"I see." His eyes seemed to be looking at something a long ways off. Then he came back to where he was. "Well, run off to the telegraph office." He handed me his messages and another paper. "This is a town treasurer's invoice. Have Mr. Arlington write out the charges on this and bring it back to me as soon as the messages are sent."

"Right away, marshal!" I said. Just as I was turning to go, a young woman came in the front door. I knew it was Mary Haynes right off, even though I hadn't seen her since she'd graduated from school a couple of years ahead of me: She was a pretty young thing, even though her eyes were red and her face puffy from weeping. She was dressed all in black, of course, on account of her pa being dead.

"Marshal Scull," she said, dabbing at her eye with a handkerchief; "please let me see Shay. I just know it wasn't him shot . . ." She paused when she saw that I was standing there with my ears flapping.

"Run along, Bernard," Mr. Scull said, getting to his feet. As I left, I could hear him offering his condolences. I wanted to hang around the door and hear more, but I knew better.

A little while later I returned with the invoice and found that Mary wasn't there any more. The marshal was sitting with his chair tilted back, his boots propped on the corner of his desk, his fingers laced behind his head, staring at the ceiling. But he didn't look like a man taking it easy. He looked like a man who was thinking hard. I put the invoice on his desk and waited to see what he would say. It turned out that it was to be a busy afternoon for me, running errands for Mr. Scull.

"Very good, Bernard. Now, if you will further oblige me, please run over to the railroad hotel and ask the foreman of those Pennsylvania oil engineers to drop by my office at his earliest convenience. And do your best to convey the impression that his earliest convenience had better be right now."

Being as how Goodnight was a small town, the hotel was no more than a two minute walk from the marshal's office. The desk man told me that the engineers had just come in from some sort of survey so I ran up the stairs and knocked on the bossman's door.

"Yes?" he said when he opened up. He was drying his hands on a towel, so I figured he'd been washing up for supper. He seemed awful young to be the head engineer; no more than five or six years older than me. The rest of the crew were roughneck-looking types, but he looked sort of refined, with delicate features and a soft, fair mustache. His eyes were mild behind a pair of nose-pincher glasses attached to a shirt button by a black ribbon.

"Marshal Scull wants to talk to you, sir. He says to come at your earliest convenience, but I reckon he'll be up here in five minutes if you don't come along with me."

He sort of sighed. "Well, I was half expecting it. Let me get my coat." A minute later he had his coat and hat and went down the stairs with me. "I hate to get embroiled in these small-town problems," he muttered, but I didn't reckon he was really talking to me.

When I took the engineer to the marshal's office, Mr. Scull said, "Bernard, please wait outside for a little while. I may have something else for you to do. If, that is, it will be all right with your father."

"Oh, Pa won't mind," I assured him. It wasn't precisely true, but I wasn't going to miss out on this.

Not more than twenty minutes later the engineer left, and Mr. Scull called me in again. "One more errand and you may go home, Bernard. Please trot over to Mrs. Blaylock's boardinghouse and have her let you into my room. You will find a trunk of books there. Be so good as to bring me the one entitled *Principles of Geology*."

"Sure thing, marshal," I said as I skinned out the door. I was more mystified than ever, but I'd about given up trying to figure out what was going on in Mr. Scull's mind.

The room Mrs. Blaylock opened for me was plain and neat. On the walls were some framed engravings a lot fancier than the chromolithographs you saw in most places. I had a feeling these belonged to Mr. Scull, not his landlady. On top of a little desk was an opened trunk that had been made into a bookcase, with shelves. The books were in a number of languages, and it didn't take me a minute to find the one he wanted, it being one of the few that was in English.

When I handed the book to him, I worked up the nerve to ask, "How come you need a book on geology, marshal?"

He answered like it was the simplest thing in the world. "Why, I need to find the exact definition of 'salt dome.'"

When I got home, Pa started to give me hell for being back so late from school, but when I told him what I'd been doing, he got real interested and wanted to hear every detail. In a town like Goodnight, this sort of thing was prime entertainment. I knew he'd be passing it all along to his cronies. But I could tell he was just as puzzled as I was.

**I**t was about a week later that the inquest was convened. People had been showing up in town from as far away as San Antonio. There was a lot of excitement in town because this was something really unusual. Trials and inquests mostly took place in the county seat.

On the morning appointed we all gathered in Tatum's saloon. It was the only place in town that had a room big enough for everyone to fit in. I managed to make a place for myself near the bar, which became the judge's bench for the occasion. Behind it sat Judge Welch. He'd made a good-sized fortune in cattle and was one of the more respected citizens of the county.

Off to one side were three chairs. Sitting in one was Marshal Scull. To either side of him sat Mart Foster and Shay Linden. Mart had a bandage around his head, and Shay had his wounded leg stuck straight

out in front of him. He'd been carried in on a litter, and you could tell from the way he winced at every movement how much the leg still pained him.

On the other side sat the people who were there to give evidence. I recognized the oil engineer, but there were two from out of town I didn't know. One was plainly a rancher. The other had more the look of a storekeeper.

A little panel of local men were seated along one wall. They constituted a grand jury of sorts. We weren't really up on the niceties of legal practice, but everybody felt that this was proof that civilization was gradually coming to our part of the world.

The most unusual thing, though, was the mannequin. It was an old wooden clothes dummy that had stood in McGoldrick's dry goods store before he got a big plate glass window put in and bought a fine new mannequin to go with it. The old dummy stood on its cast-iron pedestal in a corner of the room like a soldier on sentry duty except it had no arms or head. For some reason it was wearing an old winter range coat. I could hear folks all around me wondering to each other what it could be for. Before it, on the floor, lay a pile of clothes belonging to Elrod Haynes, even his

pearl gray hat, which rested on top.

The judge nodded to Mr. Scull, and the marshal stood.

"I hereby call to order this inquest into the circumstances surrounding the death of Elrod Haynes, a resident of La Rana County, State of Texas, the honorable Judge Alexander Welch presiding."

"Come to order," the judge said, banging his gavel on the bar. "All here are informed that this is not a trial to determine guilt or innocence, but rather an inquest for the purpose of determining whether sufficient evidence exists that a crime has been committed and that there is a suspect upon whom examination of the evidence casts suspicion sufficient for an indictment to be handed down against him.

"You are further to bear in mind that neither of these men," he pointed at Foster and Linden with the handle of his gavel, "is at this time charged with homicide—that's man-killing in case you were wondering. At present, Marshal Scull is holding them on a charge of disturbing the peace, and if firing off pistols at each other within the city limits in the middle of the night ain't disturbing the peace, I don't know what is. Marshal, please continue."

"First of all," Mr. Scull began, "I wish to thank Your Honor and these gentlemen—" he indicated the men from out of town among the witnesses—"who have made the journey here to Goodnight. I shall demonstrate that these unusual proceedings will spare the county the expense of lengthy hearings at the county seat which would otherwise incur far greater expense and probably end with no charges pressed against the culprit. I will begin with a description of the events of the fatal night as experienced by myself, these remarks to be confirmed by a number of other citizens who were there at the time."

So Mr. Scull went into exactly what had happened, getting everything down perfectly in simple words so that everyone listening knew precisely what had happened and in what order. He spoke with the grace and eloquence of an orator, but he didn't use any flowery language such as lawyers and politicians running for office favored. Then he called on Pa and McGoldrick and a dozen other men who were there that night, and every one of them said, "That's just how it happened, Your Honor," or words to that effect.

To my surprise, he called on me to stand up and tell them what I'd seen. "It wasn't much

more than these other folks can lay to," I said, nervous like I always was when the teacher called on me to stand up and address the class. "I was right there at the bar when I heard somebody going by on the sidewalk outside. In the top part of that window there," I pointed, and everyone's head swiveled to look, "I seen—I mean, I saw a pale-colored hat go by. A few seconds later I heard more steps, faster this time, like someone was trying to catch up with the first man, but I didn't see anything go by the window."

"Thank you, Bernard. Your Honor, those are the events of the evening as experienced by the eyewitnesses."

"An admirable summation, marshal," Judge Welch said.

"I thank Your Honor. These two suspects," he indicated the wounded men, "have each indicated a willingness to tell his own version of the events of that night."

"They are aware that they may be incriminating themselves?" the judge asked.

"I have so informed them," Mr. Scull answered. "Believe me, neither has the slightest inclination to incriminate himself. In fact, quite the opposite. To begin: Mr. Foster, you speak first. In view of your injury you may remain seated." There was

none of the swearing-in business they do in real trials.

"I reckon I can stand on my own feet," he said, getting up. Mart Foster was a man of middling height, maybe five six, and he held a gray hat in his hands. He had an angry, resentful look.

"Please identify yourself and give us your story," the judge said.

"I'm Martin Foster, and I'm half owner of the Foster-Haynes ranch down on Hidden Creek."

"What exactly was your experience on the night your partner was killed?"

Foster looked around as if seeking support from the audience. "Well, me and Elrod came into town that afternoon to lay in some supplies. I hadn't been off the ranch in two, three months, so I wanted to visit a bit, have supper at the Harvey House, and generally stretch myself a bit. We agreed to meet around ten by the tracks and then head on back. I got there first and waited on him; then I seen him coming down from the corner of Main. It was dark, but I could see him against the lights from Tatum's." He turned to glare at Shay Linden. "Just as he come up to me, I heard someone call him from behind. Elrod turned around, and there was a shot. There was just a second of muzzle flash, but I seen that worthless drifter there, standin'

with his gun in his fist, grin'nin'."

"You're a liar!" Linden yelled.

The judge banged his gavel. "You'll get your turn, young man. Hold your tongue. Go on, Mr. Foster."

"Well, I heard Elrod fall and I knew my line of fire was clear, so I jerked my pistol and commenced firin' where I seen that flash. He was shootin', too. I reckon I got off four shots before a ball clipped me on the scalp. Then them fellers from the saloon come out and led me indoors. I was dizzy and about blind from all the blood in my eyes. After that it was just like the marshal said."

"Was there any friction," Marshal Scull said, "that is to say, any trouble or argument between you and your partner?"

"Elrod Haynes was the best friend I ever had, and any man says that ain't true is a liar. It was that saddle bum there," he pointed a blunt finger at Linden, "that kilt him because he was tryin' to get Mary Haynes to run off with him. Elrod run *him* off instead."

This brought a great babble of conversation from the spectators. There weren't many friendly looks cast in Linden's direction.

"Thank you, Mr. Foster," the marshal said. "You may sit



down. Mr. Linden, speak your piece. You may remain seated."

"Thank you, marshal. I think I will." Linden was a tall, dark-haired young man with regular features. He normally had an engaging grin, but now he looked like a man with a rope around his neck. He sat with his dark brown hat in his lap, working its brim with nervous fingers.

"My name's Shay Linden, and I don't reckon I rightly live anywhere, just here and there where there's work. I'm a cowhand. I've worked for a good many folks in this room, and I guess they all know I earn my pay. Well, last year I worked for El—for Mr. Haynes and his partner like I had a couple of times before, branding their cattle and driving them to Bee's cow yard here in town. I seen Mary Haynes then, how she was all growed up and pretty as could be. I kept thinkin' about her all the rest of the year, and this year when I come back I asked Mr. Haynes if I could come courtin'. I asked him proper. I didn't try to go behind his back like Mart Foster said. I never asked Mary to run off with me."

"And how did Mr. Haynes react?" the marshal asked.

Linden looked shamefaced. "He said he didn't want his daughter marryin' no saddle

tramp. I told him I was an honest man, and I hadn't touched whisky all year. I offered to work for him full time with no pay if need be. He said he'd have to think long and hard about that, and meantime I was to stay away from his ranch. He told me to meet him the next evening, he'd have to go to town and get my pay from the bank. Said he had some other business to see to but he'd meet me at the tracks around ten.

"Well, I was there when he said to meet him. I heard him comin', and I heard him say, 'Shay, is that you?' No sooner'd he said that than it seemed like someone jerked him around and he started to say something, but he didn't get it out. Instead there was a shot. I saw a flash, but I didn't see who was shootin'. Elrod just made a sound like he was stranglin', then he fell. I pulled my gun the second I heard that shot, and I fired back at the killer; then all hell broke loose, and I was hit in the leg. I didn't know whether I'd hit anyone or not. I guess that's it." He twisted his hat around some more. "I don't know why Foster done it, but it was him, not me."

"The way you two were blazing away in the dark," Judge Welch said, "it's a wonder you didn't bag half the town. Marshal?"

"Thank you, Mr. Linden. Well, fellow citizens, at the moment it looks bad for Shay Linden. Both he and Mart Foster were on the spot when the murder occurred, both were armed, and both were shooting. But so far only Shay has a motive for murder. Rejected lovers have taken desperate measures in the past. This looks like a *crime passionelle*, as the French like to put it." People murmured that this was so, and Foster's chin rose a little while Shay Linden looked more down-cast than ever.

"But not so fast," Mr. Scull said, holding up a finger. "We haven't heard everything yet. I would like to question Mr. Gideon Armitage."

The oil engineer stood. "I am Gideon Armitage, geologist and foreman of an expeditionary party exploring Texas for oil on behalf of the Seneca Oil Company." He talked like a man who was used to addressing large groups.

"Will you tell us the nature of your recent business with the late Elrod Haynes?" Mr. Scull said.

"In the course of our survey of La Rana County, I found that Mr. Haynes's land lay atop a salt dome."

"A salt dome being a geological feature which some geologists theorize may be a natural

reservoir for oil, is that correct?" said Mr. Scull.

"That is correct. Although it hasn't been proved, it makes sense. Petroleum is lighter than water and would float on top."

"And what were your actions upon locating this salt dome?"

"I made what my company considers to be a more than generous offer to lease the land and commence exploring for oil. I broached the offer to Mr. Haynes. He was skeptical and said he had to discuss the matter with his partner. That was the entirety of my contact with Mr. Haynes."

"Thank you. Please be seated. I would like to call upon Miss Mary Haynes."

She stood, somber in her mourning clothes. "I am Mary Haynes, daughter and only child of Elrod Haynes."

"Miss Haynes, did your father speak to you about Mr. Linden's suit for your hand?"

She looked down and blushed a little. "Yes, he did. He wanted to know if we had been up to anything, and I assured him that we had not, that Shay had approached me like a gentleman and I had told him that he would have to speak to my father." Then she looked up, at Shay. "I told my father that I would be pleased to have Shay Linden court me. My father said that he didn't think Shay

was a fit match, but he would take it under consideration."

"Did your father speak to you about the oil company's offer?"

"He mentioned it almost jokingly at supper one night. He said it was a fool idea. Texas is cattle country, he said. Oil was just black sludge that brought Yankees snooping around."

"And that was the end of the matter?" Mr. Scull prodded.

"It was for me. But later that night, after I'd gone to bed, I heard my father and Mart Foster get into a terrible row about it. Mart was yelling that it meant more money all at once than the two of them would ever see in their entire lives. My father said they'd just pay a pittance, ruin the land, and then abandon the place if there was no oil. He said that smart men would stick to cattle. Mart stormed out and slammed the door. That was the last I heard of the matter." At the judge's nod she resumed her seat.

"So now," Marshal Scull said, "we have two men, each with a gun, an opportunity for murder and a chance to blame somebody else, and each with sufficient reason, in his own mind, to do so. Why was Elrod Haynes killed? Was it for love, or was it for money?" He had everybody there hanging on his every word, better than a professional actor. "The two suspects tell

substantially the same story. They differ mainly as to the identity of the man waiting for Elrod Haynes, and that of the man following, who actually committed murder.

"Young Bernard Bee," he nodded in my direction, "saw the hat of a tall man passing by. He could not see the pursuer. If it was Mart Foster, he would have been invisible because of his short stature. Shay Linden is a tall man, but his hat is dark-colored and would not have reflected the light from Mr. Tatum's electrical lamps."

He went to the bar and took up the two pistols. He held them up for the spectators to see, the light glinting from their plating. "These are the weapons picked up from the street after the shooting. As you can see, they are identical: Colt's Model 1873 revolvers, nickel-plated, their barrels four and three-quarters inches long, their grips made of gutta-percha. It is an exceedingly common weapon, and even the owners admitted that neither could recognize, by sight or even closer examination, which was his own."

He spun them by their trigger guards. "Now, were these weapons of differing caliber, it would be easy to say which of them was the fatal instrument because Doctor Buford removed the ball and it is in my posses-

sion. Unfortunately, both are of the .45 Colt caliber."

He had us all about convinced that we were never going to know which of the two had done it, and I knew there would soon be agitation for a double hanging, but Mr. Scull was not finished.

"However, these weapons are not quite as identical as they seem. I shall now demonstrate." He walked over to the coat-wearing dummy. "Each revolver, although a six-shooter, had only five chambers loaded, as is the practice of prudent men to prevent accidental discharge of the weapon. Each man fired four times during the murder and later exchange of gunshots. Each of these pistols has a single charge remaining in it. Please observe closely. Ladies, you may wish to cover your ears. These weapons are exceedingly loud when fired indoors."

Mr. Scull cocked the gun in his right hand and fired it at the dummy from no more than two feet away. The shot was loud all right. There was a flash and a thunderous bang, and the dummy rocked back and forth under the impact of the heavy slug. When the dense white smoke cleared a little, we could see that the cloth around the bullet hole was smoldering and there was a great smudge of black soot

around the scorched cloth. I remembered Elrod's coat that night and felt a little sick again. The burned-sulphur stink of the smoke didn't help. Mr. Scull pocketed the pistol and stooped to pick up Elrod's coat.

"Here you have seen demonstrated the effects of a common revolver of large caliber when fired at extremely close range. Besides the damage to the victim, there is extensive burning of the clothing around the entry, together with a sooty smudge covering a somewhat larger area." He held out the coat so that the front showed. "As you see, the damage I have just done to this old coat, generously donated along with the mannequin by Mr. Barton McGoldrick, is identical to the powder-burned bullet hole in Elrod Haynes's coat." He dropped the coat to the floor.

"These are the effects brought about by common black gunpowder, an amalgam of sulphur, charcoal, and potassium nitrate, commonly known as saltpeter. For four hundred years, this has been the propellant used in all firearms."

He paused for a moment, that finger raised again. "But electric lamps are not the only marvel of this new age of ours. I demonstrate. Please watch closely."

This time he took the other

gun. He cocked and fired from the same range. This time the shot was just as loud, but it had a different sound to it; less of a deep-throated boom and more of a high-pitched crack. I remembered how the second shot that night had sounded different from the first. The dummy rocked again, but this time we could see the bullet hole right away because there was hardly any smoke, just a thin, bluish haze. Then I smelled that funny chemical tang again, just like I'd smelled at the shooting site.

"This time," said Mr. Scull, "the bullet hole is all but clean. There is little scorching and no soot at all." He turned to face the spectators and held up the revolver. "That is because the cartridges in this pistol were loaded with the new smokeless powder, sometimes called gun cotton. It is a chemical compound containing none of the ingredients used in the old black powder." He laid the pistol back on the bar.

"So now we know which weapon fired the fatal shot. The question remains: to which of these two does that pistol belong?" He looked toward Foster and Linden, and they looked about equally mystified.

"I now call upon Mr. Samuel Hudson," Marshal Scull said.

The rancher-looking man

from out of town stood. "I'm Sam Hudson. I own the Anchor T ranch in Bexar County."

"Please tell us about your employment of Shay Linden."

"I've hired him a couple of times before. He was always a willing worker, never any trouble. In January I hired on some extra help because my fences were in poor shape and I didn't want any of my stock to stray in winter storms. Shay was one of the ones I hired. When the fence work was done, I paid him and the others and let them go."

"During that time did you send Shay into town with a wagon to pick up supplies?"

"That's right, marshal."

"And among the supplies, did you have him buy ammunition?"

"I sure did. For rifles and pistols both. I'd been losing calves to a cougar. I told the men who were low on cartridges to fill up their belts because I wanted that varmint killed on sight."

"And when did you dismiss Mr. Linden from your employ?"

"It was January twenty-ninth or thirtieth."

"Thank you, Mr. Hudson. Please be seated. I now wish to call Mr. Cassius Jay."

The storekeeper-looking man stood up. "I'm Cassius Jay, proprietor of Jay's Hardware in San Antonio."

"Mr. Jay, I have here a receipt, which I obtained from Mr.

Hudson, showing that on January nineteenth of this year you sold him miscellaneous goods including small arms ammunition in several calibers. Is this correct?"

"It is, sir, and I have brought my own copy of that transaction as you requested in your telegram." He reached into his coat and withdrew a paper like the one Marshal Scull held.

"Very good. Was this ammunition of the smokeless variety?"

"It was. It had arrived from the Remington arms company only a week before. A few months back, all who deal with that company received a circular advising that beginning with this lot all ammunition produced by Remington would be loaded with the new smokeless powder except for shotgun shells. They will continue loading black powder shotgun shells because older shotguns, with damascus twist barrels, are unsafe to fire with the new powder. It generates unsafe pressures."

"Thank you, Mr. Jay. You may sit down. I wish to call Mr. Barton McGoldrick."

McGoldrick stood. He didn't have to identify himself because he'd already done that when he agreed that the marshal's description of the events that night was accurate.

"Mr. McGoldrick, is your es-

tablishment the only one in Goodnight where ammunition may be purchased?"

"It is, marshal."

"And have you received any of the new smokeless ammunition?"

"No, I have not. I received the same circular as Mr. Jay, but we're usually a while behind San Antone in getting shipments. Besides, I didn't order any because I've still got a good stock of ammunition in my inventory."

"Thank you, Mr. McGoldrick." Now the marshal turned to the spectators with the look of a victorious general. "You have all heard the testimony. I have demonstrated that Elrod Haynes was killed by a ball propelled by black powder. The other pistol fired that night fired smokeless powder." He turned and pointed at Shay Linden.

"Mr. Linden here had access to the new ammunition just a few days before the murder occurred."

Now he pointed at Mart Foster like an angel of judgment pointing at a sinner. "Mart Foster, *by his own testimony*, had not been off the ranch at Hidden Creek for more than two months previous to the murder. Even if he had come to town, he could not have obtained such ammunition in Goodnight, nor

anyplace else closer than San Antonio. I hereby charge Martin Foster with the coldblooded, premeditated murder of his partner, Elrod Haynes."

Now it was Foster who looked like a man with a rope around his neck. Shay Linden looked like he'd seen a miracle, and Mary Haynes's face lit up like one of those electric lamps. Judge Welch pounded his gavel

to quiet the uproar, but he wasn't having much luck.

Mr. Scull didn't stay on much longer after that. He said the place had become too quiet.

A little while later, after the big Spindletop strike came in up near Beaumont, Mary let those engineers drill into her salt dome. All they struck was salt water. We didn't need salt water in La Rana County.

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FICTION

# THE STRANGE CASE OF MR. SAUYER AND MR. JAMES

J. Michael Moore

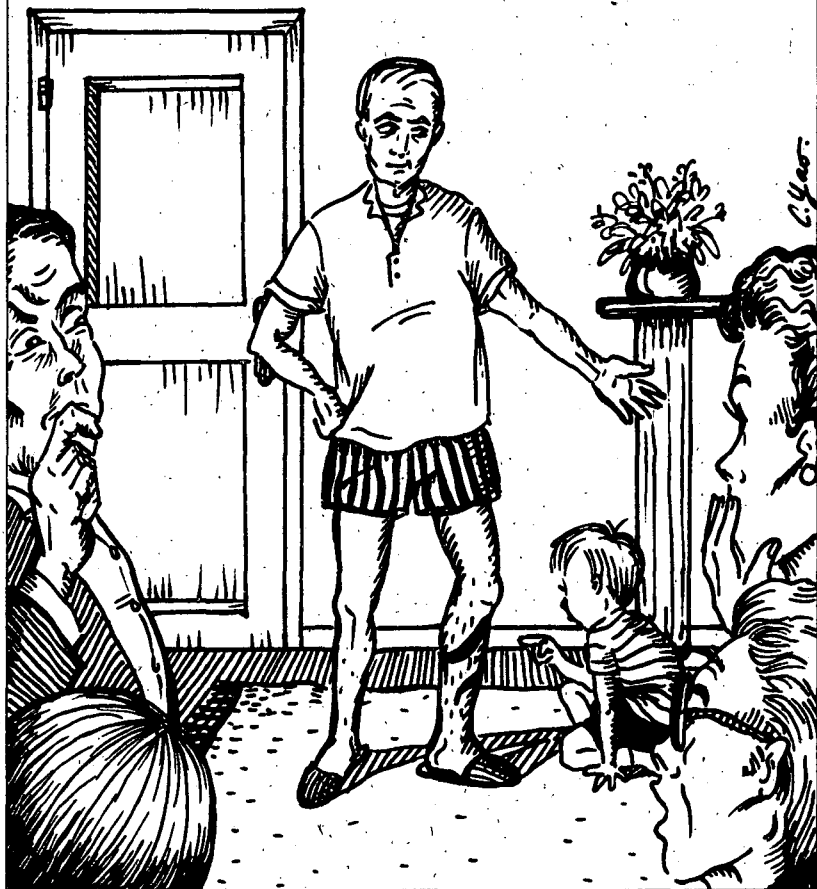


Illustration by Carolinã Yao

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**I**t was quite a shock for Mr. Sawyer, to be sure. But what do you say to a man who awakens one morning to find his left leg missing? Not the whole leg but the better part of it, the part from mid-thigh down. Part of his tattooed snake was missing, too. The snake was a sight, the way it curled around his leg and laid its head right there on his thigh, like it was getting ready to crawl up into his shorts. But the leg (the left one) was gone, and most of the snake. The cut was clean. There was no mess. The skin had just seemed to fuse together.

If Mr. Sawyer had felt anything unusual about the way he swung his legs from under the cover to the side of the bed, it did not register. Then, groggy with leftover sleep, he tried to stand up and promptly fell over. Having the impression that his leg was asleep, and therefore numb, he reached to massage it. To his horror, his hands found only the floor.

Mr. Sawyer reached critical mass quickly. First he raised the rest of the family. Then the neighbors. Finally his doctor. The doctor sedated Mr. Sawyer and examined him. "Your leg is missing," said the doctor, in that way that only doctors can say the obvious. Mr. Sawyer showed signs of violence, and everyone grabbed hold of some part of him, fearful that that too might snap off in their hands. "Can't you do something?" asked Mrs. Sawyer. "Oh, all right," said the doctor. "But I don't know what I can do. When's the last time you saw your leg? Are you sure you didn't just leave it somewhere?"

Mr. Sawyer overpowered his captors and began hopping after the doctor.

The doctor quickly scribbled out a prescription for a sedative and handed it to Mrs. Sawyer. He rushed out of the house, calling back to whoever was listening, "Call me if you need me."

Mr. Sawyer settled down a little after that first shock. He accepted this unusual twist of fate, and destroyed not quite all of the household breakables. His neighbors were not very sympathetic and figured he had lost his leg in a manner not much different from the way he had lost or broken almost anything else he had ever owned or borrowed. But no one doubted that Mr. Sawyer sincerely had no idea of the whereabouts of the vanished limb. Early on, he would go to bed each night thinking that he might awaken with things as they should be. When this failed to happen, Mr. Sawyer sank deeper and deeper into depression. Eventually, though, he started reflecting a better disposition and appeared even rosy com-

pared to his old self. He learned to use an artificial limb and got along quite nicely.

And had he not been reading the newspaper that morning, nothing further would have altered his adapted lifestyle. But somewhere between the comedy and the tragedy was a brief article that lifted him from the table and filled him with fury. The article related the unusual story of Mr. James.

Mr. James lived in another city, another state, several hundred miles from Mr. Sawyer. Mr. James awoke one morning to find himself with two fine workable legs, remarkable since Mr. James had lost his left leg as a tiny child, a victim of an unfortunate accident, indeed at a time he could not even recall. He had soldiered on into adolescence and adulthood knowing only the adjustments of outgrowing one artificial limb and having to purchase another. He had suffered little from his handicap and functioned flawlessly in his work, his city, and his family. But on this fateful morning he was ill-at-ease, as though he had awakened with a stranger in his bed. He was not sure if he should try to walk on it, but he did and it performed well. It did not really match the other. It was ruddy in appearance and covered with coarse hair. It was slightly shorter and slightly stouter than the other. It bore a scar about the knee as though from an incision. And oddest of all, a tattoo of what appeared to be the lower half of a serpent twined around the upper part of the leg. It was a used leg all right. But Mr. James did not complain. The skin fused well into his own. He did walk with a slight limp still, but one somewhat less pronounced than before.

The family was exuberant, and had it not been for their excitement, Mr. James would have tried to keep this thing quiet for a while, just to keep a sober eye on things and to get accustomed to having two legs again. After all, since Mr. James always wore long pants, and since he still favored his new leg a little, there was no real reason to publish the news. His family could not contain their pleasure, however, and immediately told the world. Friends and neighbors came calling, and before long, Mr. James was compelled to parade around in a pair of shorts to satisfy everyone's curiosity. Some found it revolting, but all found it remarkable. And remark they did. They asked a lot of questions, questions that indicated more than a grain of disbelief.

Mr. James's doctor knew, of course, that this leg did not any more belong to him than Van Gogh's ear. But there it was, plain as the nose on his face, so to speak. As it is the nature of the human mind

to devise a probable cause for any unusual phenomenon, the doctor thought about such things as back alley transplants, mass hysteria, or even if he was examining an impostor who had carted away poor Mr. James and assumed his identity.

Mr. James became the object of points and stares. As he walked down the street, people would clump together and talk in hushed tones. Occasionally someone would just walk along behind him for a while, saying nothing. But what could one say? You can't just let a thing like that pass by without taking some interest. No one doubted that it had happened. Certainly no one understood it any more than Mr. James did. But he accepted it. He accepted it very well and made it his own and learned to live with it. After all, his golf handicap fell by a full three strokes.

Inevitably, the reporters descended. They wanted to see the leg, wanted to photograph the leg, and wanted photographs of the previously truncated leg. Mr. James had none, would not allow a photograph of the leg, and did not even allow a good peek at the leg. For he had nothing to prove. He was happy with his good fortune. He was tired of the attention, and though he had tolerated it well enough, his patience was wearing thin. He did, however, permit a family portrait and answered all questions about the leg, its size, shape, and all distinguishing features. The story was run in that town's daily and fed to other cities by the wire services. The story appeared in Mr. Sawyer's paper a few days later.

Poor Mr. Sawyer. He had all but accepted his situation as irreversible, and then he found his leg. He knew it was his leg the minute he read the story. How this Mr. James, hundreds of miles away, had happened to come up with it he did not know. But it was his leg, and he wanted it back, and he would have it back. He again became a picture of anxiety, stomping about and ranting about his leg. Nothing would do other than going to see this man about the leg.

Mr. James was not hard to find. His address and photograph had been published. Mr. Sawyer did allow his wife to drive him, as even he recognized that he was in no condition to drive. He plotted all along the way just what he would do. After all, what could he do? He couldn't just steal the thing. It would have been much simpler that way. He couldn't offer a reward. He couldn't even buy it back. Mr. James appeared from the news story to be a decent sort of fellow. And Mr. Sawyer could be, too, if he tried. Perhaps they could work out some kind of arrangement. If not, well then, Mr. Sawyer

would just have to think of something else. It really shouldn't be hard to convince this man—that is, if he would listen to reason.

When he arrived at Mr. James's house, Mr. Sawyer sat in his car for awhile. He knew what he wanted, he just didn't know how to get it. He knew he must use a controlled approach, since no one takes a ranting man seriously. His evidence was indisputable, however, and if his wife's testimony wasn't enough, he could send for his whole neighborhood.

Mr. James was at home alone that day. He happened to look out the window and see a car parked in front of his house with a man inside it who kept staring at the front door. Then he saw the man get out of the car and walk with a pronounced limp up the front walk toward the door. By the time Mr. Sawyer rang the bell, Mr. James was at the door, for he felt that this man had something on his mind other than curiosity and Mr. James wanted to find out what it was.

When they were face to face, Mr. Sawyer, after several hours of carefully piecing together an airtight case, had only one thing to say: "You have my leg." That was enough to set Mr. James back a little. He asked for a repetition, got it, and began thinking about what he could do to rid himself of this very strange fellow. By this time Mrs. Sawyer had sensed that her husband might not be handling things with diplomacy and joined him. Mr. Sawyer repeated his accusation for a third time, with a little more enthusiasm. Mr. James looked at Mrs. Sawyer and said, "Do you know what this is all about?"

Mrs. Sawyer only said, "I think you had better talk to him. You're going to have to sooner or later anyway."

Mr. James led them into the living room, seated them, and said, "Now, just what is it that you want?" He hoped to get this unpleasant matter out of the way as quickly as possible.

Mr. Sawyer said nothing but, noting that there were only the three of them in the room, simply got up and dropped his pants to the floor. Mr. James did not have time to think about what kind of perversions this very odd man might be up to, for he immediately noticed that the limp he had observed was the result of an artificial leg strapped onto the left thigh, and there where it was strapped (could it really be?) was the head of a serpent peeking at him. And not just any serpent, for he realized instantly that this was the rest of his serpent.

It was a shock, to be sure. It had seemed inconceivable to Mr.

James that his leg could come from another person, or at least a person who was still using it. He just wanted so much to have this leg. He had started out life with two legs, and now he again had two. So it was a little different in skin color, and so it was a little hairier. But there was the blasted snake. The snake spoiled everything. The snake reared its ugly head above that harness and destroyed his illusion.

Mr. James sat in confounded silence while Mr. Sawyer pulled his trousers up. He was waiting for the judgment, for he knew it must be coming. With good fortune there must be judgment, and such good fortune as this must have severe judgment indeed. Such a fatalistic view was not common to Mr. James, but it was the culmination of strange forebodings he had had ever since the appearance of the leg.

And what of Mr. Sawyer? He knew he had made his point in the most forcible way he could, but that was the easy part. It was one thing to be convincing and another for justice to be served and for him to walk away on his two good legs. He could see that Mr. James was staggered, but he was still a long way from what he wanted. After all, he knew that possession was at least eight- or nine-tenths of the law.

Mr. Sawyer finally spoke. "Well, what do you plan to do about it?"

Mr. James honestly did not know what he was going to do about it. And he certainly could do nothing at that very moment. He wanted only to be rid of this most unwelcome guest. All he could say was, "Let me think about it."

Mr. Sawyer took this opening. "Think about it! You have my leg! How you got it I'll never know. But I know this much. You had better figure out a way to give it back or I'll find a way. You had better just start thinking right now . . ."

Mr. Sawyer was beginning to lose his composure, having trouble finishing sentences he had no business starting. Before he could start another tirade, Mrs. Sawyer stepped in and said, "Let's give the man a little time to think about it, dear. Can't you see he's upset right now?"

Mr. Sawyer began to launch into an oration about who had the most right to be upset, but he remembered his blood pressure, realized that a leg was easier to replace than a heart, and walked toward the door. "I'll be back at seven o'clock tonight," he said, and he and Mrs. Sawyer left poor Mr. James alone.

\*

Now Mr. James was thinking that he would rather this had never happened than that he seem a petty thief. He wouldn't take the time of day from another man, much less steal the very props from under him. If he woke up one morning and found that the leg had disappeared as it had arrived, he would have no regrets. He couldn't question such happenings. But this was different. It really took the wind out of his sails to think that he might be guilty of receiving stolen property.

When Mrs. James returned that evening, Mr. James was still brooding. "I know where it came from," he said. "It" was the most uncomplimentary thing he had said about the leg since its arrival. "It" was beginning to disgust him somewhat, with the coarse hair and the ridiculous snake twirled around. He wished he could rip the snake off and chop it up with the garden hoe as he would any snake he found in the yard. He was looking upon the leg now as an alien, a visitor whose intentions were good but who was really not welcome at all.

"What do you mean?" Mrs. James responded. "What do you mean you know where it came from? You just woke up one morning and there it was. What more could there be?"

"The man who had the leg came by here today," said Mr. James. "The previous owner. The man with the rest of the snake, the red-faced man with half a hairy snake who limped up here today and dropped his pants."

Mrs. James stopped putting away groceries long enough to say, "But that's absurd. Any nut could lay claim to your leg. Did he have any proof?"

"He had indisputable proof. He had proof so that I wanted to yank the thing off and give it to him right then and there. It was the right color, it was the right size, and there was that stupid snake. The rest of the snake was on his leg."

"So? Anyone could have half a snake tattooed on his thigh. Did he have any real proof?" his wife continued.

"Real proof! What more does he need? I'm in real trouble, and I don't know what to do about it. He's coming over here tonight and he's going to ask me what I'm going to do and I don't know what I'll tell him."

"What kind of man was he?"

"He was the kind of man who would have a snake tattooed on his leg."

Mrs. James was beginning to appreciate the gravity of the matter



now. She saw that her husband really was tormented, not just because of this man's anticipated visit, but because of the whole episode. They had hoped that things would return to normal soon, but now it was evident that that would not happen.

"Did you get his name and address?" she asked. "We could have him checked out. My brother at the police station could find out if he's some kind of con artist or something."

Mr. James was not comforted. He knew the truth, and all he could think about was what he was going to tell this mystery man who was coming to his house in a couple of hours to demand his leg back.

Mr. and Mrs. Sawyer had several hours to spend in a strange town where they knew nobody and had nothing to do. They went to the public library and read the remarkable accounts of Mr. James's new leg in the local papers. There was much more information than there had been in the state papers, and Mr. Sawyer became angrier and angrier as he read. He left Mrs. Sawyer there while he walked around town, striking up conversations with people he would never have thought of talking to before. He met a few who knew Mr. James. He even met a couple who had seen the leg and gave him firsthand information. Of course none of these people had any idea who this man was, probably just another out-of-towner who had heard of their strange case.

At ten minutes before seven Mr. James let the Sauyers into his house. They sat in the living room just as they had that afternoon. Mr. Sawyer spoke first.

"Well, what are you going to do about my leg?"

Mr. James had thought long and hard about his reply but had come up empty. All he could respond with was, "What would you like me to do?"

"The situation seems pretty clear to me." Mr. Sawyer said. "Between the two of us, we have three good legs. One of your two good legs bears a striking resemblance to my one good leg. From what I can find out around this town here, your new leg is just the better part of the stub I'm carrying around. Now, I wouldn't want to call it stealing, but it looks like you have something that doesn't belong to you. Let's just say a mistake was made and now we need to find a way to set things right."

Mr. James did not waver. "I consider myself a reasonable man," he said. "I'm willing to listen to whatever you have to say. Maybe I have something that belonged to you at one time. I can't say that I

know what to do about it, though. It's not something I've run up against before, you know. But I just can't help but think this is all happening for a reason. I don't know what that reason is, but I don't want to go contrary to it. We may wake up tomorrow with things the way they were before. And then I would just have to accept that as the way things happen. We just can't always find a reason for these things, and what looks right to us is sometimes dead wrong."

Mr. Sawyer wasn't feeling very good about things. He figured that he was going to have to leave and give this some more thought. He had stated his case, had gotten this character with his leg to pretty well admit it, and could see that there wasn't much more to be accomplished that evening.

"So," Mr. Sawyer said, "it looks like I'll have to take stronger action to get back what is rightfully mine. You'll be hearing from me soon. Enjoy it while you can." With that he grabbed his wife and headed for the door.

Mr. James did not rest easily afterwards. He did not know what action Mr. Sawyer would or could take. But the most hideous dreams he had ever experienced stole his sleep from him. He all but wished the leg had never appeared, all but. He retained his faith that there was a reason for what was happening, and consoled himself with the fact that he had done nothing to bring it on. You just don't go around messing with fate, especially where life and limb are involved. He didn't really know what this fellow might try, but all he could do was wait. It wasn't easy, but he waited.

About two weeks later Mr. James received a call from a lawyer, a Mr. Grueston, retained by Mr. Sawyer. Together they agreed to let an arbitrator hear the case. They agreed to allow a small gallery to observe the proceedings, such was the sensation the case had aroused.

Mr. Sawyer had contacted his lawyer, Mr. Grueston, soon after his meeting with Mr. James. This barrister of some disrepute had helped him out on some tax problems that still had the IRS scratching their collective heads. He was quite eager to get involved in another deal with Mr. Sawyer, for he knew him to be a man whose passion for revenge outweighed his appreciation for temperance, and whose checkbook would support almost any litigation in which his sense of propriety was violated. Therefore, Grueston was more than happy to take on this common thief who had wronged Mr. Sawyer. Mr. Sawyer described the situation, and Grueston, like any good lawyer, agreed that Mr. Sawyer had a case of remarkable merit. Mr.

Sauyer was happy for the first time in weeks, not wholly about the prospect of having his limb returned to him, but about the prospect of presenting to another man a show of force, of stripping him of something he held dear, and of holding a firm upper hand in a transaction. For Mr. Sauyer was the sort of man who seldom compromised and was never sympathetic. He loathed the men who had been placed in the seats of power and glory only because of good fortune or a timely birth. Mr. Sauyer's only power and glory had come from the few times he had felt that he had gotten the better of another man, and to him Mr. James, though he wasn't the type of man he had come to loathe, was a man who had something he shouldn't have. Anything Mr. Sauyer could do to diminish him would be delicious.

As the day of the hearing approached, Mr. James grew more and more apprehensive. He consoled himself only with the fact that there was really nothing he could do, and anything he might do would probably bring more harm than good. Whatever happened, he would be no worse off than he was in the beginning, and given what had happened, he could not rule out that he might even be better off. For when such a thing happens to a man, he cannot but think that destiny has smiled on him, and in the balance of things, he has gotten one slight nudge to the plus side. Against the advice of his family, he had decided not to call a lawyer. Anyhow, where would you find a lawyer with experience in transmuted limbs?

The parties had agreed to let a judge in Mr. Sauyer's city be the arbiter for the case, to decide what perhaps only King Solomon could be expected to decide. There was an unusual amount of attention given the case by the press, considering that no one had been brutally murdered and that neither of the principals had the least bit of sex appeal. But to those unaccustomed to the unusual, the case proved to be a singular treat.

When he arrived in the courtroom that day, Mr. Sauyer had to laugh to see how easy it would be to bring this pathetic man to justice. For there sat Mr. James with only his wife and no other representation, looking beaten already. He had no paperwork with him. Just a large, a very large, leather-bound legal dictionary that sat on the table before him. Sauyer had, of course, come without his artificial limb, using crutches he had lost facility with, trying to look a little more helpless than he had come to be. The judge, a white-

haired man of some sixty years who thought he had seen it all, arrived and hammered the proceedings open.

Grueston took the floor, stating that his client had been robbed of something dear to him and that the defendant had in fact brought with him into the courtroom the object in question, making no attempt to hide it. He further outlined the case for the judge, explaining how Mr. Sawyer had found his leg missing, had accepted his fate honorably, and then discovered the crook, Mr. James, who not only had his leg, but had crowed about it to one and all. Grueston went on to explain about the coincidence of these two things' occurring on the same day, about the general appearance of the legs, about the medical records that explained the scar on the knee, and, of course, about the snake, the terrible tell-tale snake. At this point he called for the two men to lower their pants (not wishing to show contempt for the court, each man had worn gym shorts under his trousers) so the judge could see the strongest evidence in Mr. Sawyer's favor.

The judge asked Mr. James to stand directly behind Mr. Sawyer so that the alignment of the limbs was perfect. He was undoubtedly impressed, but said nothing, and merely made a few notes. He then allowed the defendant his turn.

Mr. James, obviously not at ease with the situation, for surely he had the most to lose, rose from his chair and addressed the judge.

"Your Honor," he began, "I will not try to explain to you what has happened to me, for I do not understand it any more than you. I cannot say that I have never wished for such a thing, but I had managed well for years before it happened and was simply happy when it did.

"But I would like to make an observation, one I think to be relevant. I remember some time ago that a young couple bought a piece of land near my town. They hired a contractor to build a house on the land. As the house was being finished, a woman, unacquainted with them, approached them with the information that she owned the land and it was nice of the young couple to build a house for her."

Mr. Sawyer began gesturing wildly to his lawyer, who in turn, somewhat half-heartedly, questioned the judge. "Your Honor, have I missed the point? Are we talking about real estate now?"

The judge asked Mr. James to continue.

"The woman produced the necessary papers to show that she did indeed own the property. The couple had been deceived into thinking that they held a clear title, and had built a house on property

they did not own. However, in attaching the house to real property, they had made the house a part of that real property they did not own.

"And now, in my own case, since I did nothing to . . ."

Mr. Sawyer jumped up and teetered on his good leg. "Is he trying to say that I stuck that thing on him and now it belongs to him? Com'ere, I'll get it off for you!"

Grueson and the bailiff settled Mr. Sawyer down, and Mr. James continued. "I don't know how it got here, or how long it will stay, but I do know that I ended up with it, and it is now a part of me and no one else, even though he might have some silly snakehead tattooed on his thigh." Grueson and the bailiff moved toward Mr. Sawyer, but he just sat, fixing a hard stare on the defendant. Mr. James walked to the side of the table where his wife was seated and picked up the massive dictionary he had brought into the courtroom. "My blood is pumping through it, and I feel the aches and pains that come out of it. My heart and my soul are attached to it." Here he lifted the dictionary above his head and brought it down with some violence toward his left foot. The dull thud alerted each person in the room, and in the silence that followed, each person noted the anguish on Mr. James's face. "Did anyone else in this room feel that?" he asked in a voice strained by the experience. "Has anyone else registered this pain?" he directed to the plaintiff's table. "Will anyone else take home with them the injury I have sustained?" he directed to the judge. "Can anyone else truly lay claim to something he has no attachment to?" He turned sharply to Mr. Sawyer, expecting a response. There was none, other than the hard glare that had been trained on him since the last outburst.

Mr. James had made his point and had nothing more to say. He sat down and tended to his foot. Grueson managed to beat a few ideas a little more soundly and then let it rest, for although Mr. Sawyer had not lost his passion, his quiver seemed to be empty. The days and weeks of fury had exhausted his creativity, and any attempt he made to express himself resulted only in a display of froth and steam. The judge took his leave to ponder his verdict.

When he returned two hours later, the principals in the case were already in place. The judge spoke his verdict. "The variety of injustice in the world is endless. It is our duty as a judicial system to reverse those injustices. But in a case as unusual as this one, I feel that I must reserve judgment. For in hearing the testimony of the witnesses and in reading the sworn statements I have come to the

conclusion that this event that we have tried to unravel here today is not an act of injustice, but simply an act of justice performed by some power beyond those we are familiar with. When the forces of mankind conspire to defeat the cause of justice, we must interfere. But when the forces of the cosmos decide to take it upon themselves to salvage equality, to install a virtuous act with us, to return to a man something that should not have been taken from him, even though it is similar in appearance to another's, I feel I cannot interfere. Therefore, as it is not in my jurisdiction to defeat the powers of justice, I rule that Mr. James is the proper and rightful owner of his left leg."

The next morning Mr. James awoke at his usual time and in his usual manner. He stood, walked across the bedroom to the bathroom, and looked into the mirror. He reached up and pushed the wavy blond hair from his eyes. He smiled, not only because each morning previous to this one he had had no hair to brush aside but because he knew that this was only the beginning of many wonderful things that would happen to him.

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# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Photo by Brian N. Cox

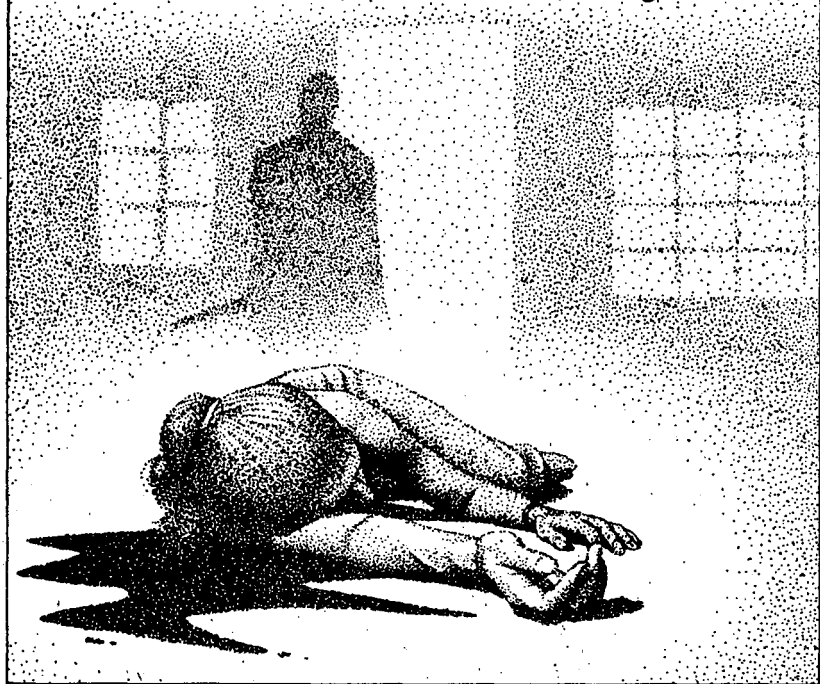
No rustling allowed. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "December Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the July Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.



# The Red Dress

Barbara Kennedy



**A**fter she called 911, with her back to the bright red body sprawled on the white rug, she tried to remember Uncle George's telephone number in Tampa. Her grandmother's address book was

in the drawer of the teak desk that matched the other furniture, good quality, Anna said, not this seaside condo junk. How incongruous that she had to look up a number she'd been calling all her life. She found it

and dialed. One ring, two—thank God he was in.

"George Seegstrom." He had a little bit of a Southern accent. Anna hated it, and hired elocution teachers for her grandchildren.

"Uncle George?" As if he hadn't identified himself. She couldn't function, couldn't even sound like herself, so that George too had a question in his voice as he said, "Jennifer?"

"I'm at the cottage. Anna's. She's—somebody killed her. I called 911. Can you come?"

There was a pause. George was known for his slow decisions, except when he lost his temper. Please God don't let him talk and talk and talk—

"I'll be right there," he said. "You just hang in there, honey."

Her hand trembled as she put down the phone. She shivered. The small house was freezing cold, much colder than Anna liked it, an Arctic cold made icier by the white walls. White? they queried. In a vacation cottage?—and Anna said, Vacation doesn't mean living like a slob. Jennifer felt frozen stiff and, for the first time in her life, on the edge of hysteria. She had to get out of here.

Blundering across the rug, not looking at that splash of scarlet, she found the door and went outside. Blistering heat enveloped her. Florida was in its

sixth week of drought in this usually rainy season. The dazzling early evening sun raised sweat under her cotton dress. Her springy brown hair felt lank and her brown eyes stung behind her sunglasses, but her bones were ice-cold. She stumbled along the asphalt path to her red Prelude parked in front of the one-car garage, got in, turned on the motor and the air conditioner, and waited.

A sheriff's patrol deputy came first, ascertained that her report of a murder was true, and radioed his headquarters in Tampa. He checked around the outside of the cottage, an easy task since it stood in a clearing surrounded on all sides by orange groves. The trees drooped in the heat, but their leaves were green and their fruit tinged with gold. Anna's caretaker was under orders to water all night if necessary.

There were restrictions on residential watering, but Anna ignored them and no one came to check on her. The listless grass around the cottage maintained its healthy color. Only the pond in front, receding every day from its boundaries so that before long it would be nothing more than a puddle, measured the ferocity of the September sun. Anna had planted fast-growing water oaks around the cottage for

shade, but that was only three years ago and they were still more decorative than useful.

The deputy came to her car and stood with his arm on the roof. The fact that he was young and goodlooking skimmed past without registering as Jennifer lowered her window.

"No sign of forced entry," he said. "I see she had an alarm system."

"Yes. She wasn't scared, but she was careful." Past tense; she felt tears in her eyes.

"How did you get in?"

"When she didn't answer, I tried the door. I knew something was wrong when it opened. Usually she was locked up like a fortress."

"There's a Mercedes in the garage. That her car?"

"Yes."

"I looked all through the house, there's nobody there. She live out here alone?"

"She didn't live here. It was her hideaway. She came periodically, usually on the spur of the moment."

When there was no symphony, no opera, no gallery reception, no board meeting. Anna liked to keep busy, working ten and twelve hours a day even though she had her seventieth birthday this year, working weekends or filling them with parties and people. In the summer the social life slowed down.

People went to the mountains. Anna said she'd go mad up there; it rained all the time. As for cruises, she went on one once and was bored to death. Why trek around the world when you could see it all on television?

Afraid to go away and give us a break, the family muttered, afraid to lose control. They thought she was crazy when she bought this little 1950's house three years ago, its only access a dirt road through the grove. But it was only fifteen miles east of the city and two miles off the interstate, she could make up her mind on the spur of the moment that she was coming and be here from her house, or her office, in Tampa in less than an hour. That's what happened on Thursday.

Jennifer started to tell him but he said, "That's okay, ma'am, homicide team'll be here any minute," and went to his patrol car to call in again on the radio.

It seemed a long time until the sheriff came. In person, because Anna Seegstrom's name meant something. His car was followed by two others and an unmarked van. They parked on the grass in front of the cottage. The homicide team went inside while the sheriff commiserated

with Jennifer with her car door open.

"Miss Palmer? I sure am sorry about this. You're the lady's granddaughter?" She nodded. "Detective Lamar's in charge of the case, best homicide detective I have. He'll want to talk to you."

"I don't want to go back in the cottage."

He mopped his forehead as he stood in the sun. "He'll have to have you show him exactly what you found when you got here. You can wait till your uncle comes if you like. You called him, right?"

Even as he spoke she saw George's new Cadillac shoot out from the orange trees onto the asphalt path that led to the cottage. A slow man in many things, he was a demon behind the wheel. He jerked to a stop beside the police cars. There was someone with him. Her cousin Danny, agile and slender in jeans and cotton shirt behind his father's bulk, sprinted toward her. Relief made Jennifer weak for a moment, then she stumbled out of her car into his arms. In two inch heels, she was as tall as he.

"Okay, Jen," he said into her hair. "It's okay. The relief troops got through."

Joking when his grandmother had been murdered. She managed a weak laugh which shat-

tered into sobs that wracked her body as he held her.

"Okay," he said again. "It's going to be okay. Dad's going to drive you home, I'll drive your car."

George joined them, embracing her from the back so that she was cocooned between them. Portly in khaki slacks and a blue plaid sports shirt, he got his grey eyes and what was left of his sandy hair from his father, his big build, too, although Marcus Seegstrom was killed by a drunken driver before he had time to grow fat.

The sheriff stood apart in sympathy for a moment before intruding. "Miss Palmer didn't want to go in the house till you got here," he said after introductions were made and condolences extended. "I'll see if Detective Lamar's ready for her."

Sweat streamed down George's florid face and rose under all their clothing. They were going to sit in the Cadillac, but the sheriff beckoned from the small front porch and they went instead into the cottage. Every light was on, and the small rooms were filled with people, two men squatting in front of the fireplace, another moving around Anna's body with a camera, a uniformed woman giving directions to the cottage over her radio in the kitchen, a red-headed man with a shaggy mus-

tache introduced by the sheriff as Detective Lamar. He told them that the medical examiner hadn't arrived yet but it looked as if Mrs. Seegstrom died from a blow to the head.

"There's a hunk of wood beside her, has blood on it, looks as if it came from that pile outside." Stacked under cover for the few cold nights of winter; Anna had had a fireplace built into the little living room. "This how you found the place, Miss Palmer?"

He indicated the dark teak server in the dinette. The pieces of the silver coffee service that usually sat upon it were scattered on the rug, the coffeepot missing. Jennifer nodded. He pulled open a drawer in the server, using one finger. The sterling flatware lay neatly grooved inside. Lamar led them through the house, warning them not to touch anything. In the single bedroom Anna's silver toiletry set lay on the dresser. The contents of every drawer and cupboard were arranged with regimental neatness, seemingly intact.

"The coffeepot seems to be the only thing missing," Jennifer said. Her throat was so dry that she could hardly speak. She kept her eyes away from the living room. George and Danny echoed her words.

"So they took just that one

thing," Lamar said, "and left two hundred sixty dollars in her purse." A small red eelskin purse in plain view on the coffee table. "No credit cards," he added. "Should there be?"

"Not out here," Jennifer said. "She was careful about things like that."

"Her car's in the garage, keys in her purse."

"Something must have frightened him away," George surmised. Even in this freezing cold, sweat streamed off him. "He heard Jenny's car drive up, grabbed the coffeepot, and ran."

"Miss Palmer would have seen him," Lamar objected.

"Not if he ran out back, into the grove."

"The back door was locked, sir. Front door unlocked; alarm turned off as if she let somebody in."

"He talks his way in, attacks her, hears the car coming through the grove, dashes out the front door, hides around back till Jenny goes in the house, runs into the grove."

"Could be," Lamar acknowledged. "Miss Seegstrom leave all this silver here in an empty house?" His accent was hardly noticeable, but he used the Southern Miss for Mrs.

"She brought it with her," Jennifer said, and heard Anna's incisive voice, I'm not going to live like a pig out there.

They were all standing. Lamar sent George with one of his men to confirm that the body was that of his mother and let Jennifer sit at the dropleaf table positioned against the dinette wall, with her back to the living room. Danny had followed his father.

"So," Lamar said. "You got here when? Be as exact as you can."

"I looked at my car clock when I got off I-4, it was ten to six. I must have got here almost exactly at six."

"You meet anybody driving out when you were driving in?"

No, and she hadn't seen anyone around the house.

"I didn't know Miss Seegstrom, but the sheriff said she came down to the department when she bought this place, told him she'd only be here once in a while, asked him to keep an eye on it." Demanded, Jennifer thought: Anna never made requests. "There's nobody home at that house where you turn in off the road. I understand that's where the grove caretaker lives."

"That's right. My grandmother would tell him when she was expecting somebody. The rest of the time he was supposed to keep people out."

"She expecting you?"

She said that she'd decided to come here on the spur of the mo-

ment, driving down I-4, the exit to Anna's cottage coming up fast.

"Anna?" he queried. "You called your grandma by her first name?"

"We all did. She wouldn't allow anything else." I am Anna Seegstrom. I made my reputation as a clothing manufacturer, not as a mother.

She knew that Anna was here because she lived with her grandmother and Kruffy had come by on Thursday afternoon to pack the things Anna wanted for the weekend. Kruffy was Elsa Kruff, Anna's personal assistant at A and M Sportswear, A and M for Anna and Marcus, her grandfather's idea.

George, breathing heavily, muttering oh my God, came back and sat in the teak chair opposite Jennifer's.

"You like a glass of water, sir?" Lamar asked. He brought glasses for both of them. "You mentioned A and M Sportswear," he prompted Jennifer. "Miss Seegstrom owned it, right?"

"Took over when my father was killed in an automobile accident forty-five years ago," George said. "It was a struggling company then. She built it into what it is today."

He told the story that Jennifer had heard a thousand times, how Anna drove from one retail-

er to another with samples in her trunk and her two young children in the car because she couldn't afford a sitter, how she operated out of her apartment when she couldn't pay the rent on her office-warehouse, how she was down to the last can of soup when she got a commission for high school cheerleader uniforms and never looked back. It was probably exaggerated, Jennifer thought, but it didn't exaggerate her grandmother's invincible will.

"Now we're in department stores all over the country," George said. "My son's our head designer."

He looked up at Danny, who'd drifted over to them and stood shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Restless, like Anna. Looked like her, too, slender and fast-moving, with quick blue eyes and pale skin almost matched by his silvery blond hair. Jennifer was five six to his five eight, well-built, with a tan. Anna hated it that she took after her father.

"I'm the executive vice-president," George continued, "but my mother really ran things. Had her finger on everything. Extraordinary woman." He sighed and mopped his face.

"You know anyone might have a grudge against her?"

"No." He said it too fast, and backtracked. "There were busi-

ness rivalries, of course, the competition's cutthroat, especially nowadays, but nothing personal. We're probably going to sell out to one of the big companies soon. Anna was just holding out for her price."

"You all came out to visit when she was here, did you?"

They looked at each other. George said, "You only came if you were invited. The first year she bought the place she had a barbecue. That's the only time we were here together." He looked again at Jennifer and Danny for their confirming nods.

"She's dressed like she was going out to eat," Lamar said. "Nice dress, purse on the table. You know who with?" They shook their heads. "Would she go by herself?"

Again they looked at each other. "She did what she wanted," George said. "If she wanted to go out and there was nobody to go with, she'd go."

"But you think she'd be more likely to call somebody to eat with her," Lamar surmised. "Do you know if she called somebody to go with her tonight?" They shook their heads. "She didn't call any of you?" he persisted.

"No," they said in unison.

"You, sir," looking at George. "When was the last time you spoke to Miss Seegstrom?"



"This afternoon. I took off Wednesday for Hilton Head, played in a pro-am tournament Thursday. I intended staying the whole weekend, but my mother wasn't real happy about that so I decided to come home today, go into the office tomorrow. I called on my car phone to tell her I was on my way."

When he left college with the business degree Anna had insisted on, he'd wanted to try his luck as a professional golfer or, as Anna called it when she vetoed the idea, professional bum. So he became a businessman who spent a lot of time on the golf course and was still in demand to play with the pros on the pro-am day of tournaments throughout the Southern states.

"Played with Nick Price," he bragged now to Lamar. "God, that man is super-human! We won," looking at Danny. "You'd have been proud of your old man even if I did wrap my number five around a tree on the last hole."

"When did you leave up there?" Lamar asked.

"I guess a little before noon. Stayed over Friday to see the pros play, followed Nick around this morning, then I hit the road. It takes about six hours." He looked at Jennifer. "I'd just got home when you called."

"What time did you call Miss Seegstrom?"

"Maybe around two o'clock." In response to further questions he said that Anna sounded normal, said she was having a good rest, didn't mention any plans for dinner.

Lamar questioned Danny, who said that he last saw his grandmother at work on Thursday. She didn't mention her plans for the weekend; he'd heard from Krufty just before he left the office that Anna had gone to the cottage.

"So," the detective said, and let it hang in the air for a moment. Then, briskly, he asked George and Danny to go around outside with Sergeant Cleaver and point out anything amiss.

Jennifer cleared her throat as her uncle and cousin followed the female deputy out of the front door. "There is one thing," she said, shivering in her short sleeves. "My grandmother kept the place cool but not like this. It's freezing in here."

"Down to sixty," Lamar agreed. "As low as it'll go. Usually when somebody does that it's to speed up rigor mortis, help them with their alibi. If you hadn't come along when you did, she might not have been found till when, Monday? Is that when she'd have been missed?"

Jennifer nodded. "I'd have been surprised when she didn't come home Sunday, but I don't think anyone would have been

alarmed until she didn't show up for work on Monday morning."

"M.E. would have had a hard time fixing the time of death." He leaned over her, his expression alert, his voice condoling. "What made you come here today, Miss Palmer? Did you have an idea something was wrong?"

"I told you, it was spur of the moment. I was coming back from a job interview. I wanted to tell her about it."

"You got the job, did you?" and after she nodded, "Your grandma would have liked that, huh?"

"She wanted me to work for her. I started out with business courses, changed my major to theater arts a couple of years ago. I had to go an extra year." There was hell to pay. Anna threw a vase at her, wouldn't pay for the fifth year, made a scene at graduation.

"You were going to break the news you weren't going to work for her?"

"Something like that."

"Where was your interview, ma'am?"

"At the Contemporary Hotel at Disney World. The man I had to see is on vacation there with his family."

"He from out of state?"

"California. I had an interview there last month, but he was in Europe. He wanted to meet me before he gave the final okay."

"You didn't call your grandma on your car phone so she'd be expecting you?"

"I was only ten minutes away when I got the idea. If I'd called —" She broke off the sentence, regretting that she'd started it.

"Yes, ma'am?" he prompted.

"She might have told me not to come. Sometimes she didn't want to be disturbed."

"So you thought you'd surprise her." He sounded sympathetic, but his pale green eyes were hard and bright and locked onto hers when she tried to avoid his gaze. She shivered uncontrollably. As if he understood her desire to get out into the sun, he dropped his line of questioning, asked for the name of the man who'd interviewed her, and let her go home with George and Danny.

"You can't go back into that house all by yourself," George said. "Move in with me."

"All right, but tonight take me to Kruffy's."

He didn't argue, and reminisced about his mother on the half-hour drive that seemed to take forever. Jennifer slumped in the seat beside him with her eyes closed, her memory refusing to extend beyond the cottage, that awful red splotch on the rug, Lamar's questions.

"It was an itinerant," George declared. "Talked his way in,

had that hunk of wood behind his back. Maybe he only meant to threaten her, but she'd give him a hard time. So he attacked her, got scared when he saw what he'd done, ran off."

Lamar didn't believe that. Jennifer didn't say it; she was too tired to talk and too scared to discredit his theory. It could have happened that way. They'd said when Anna bought the place that she was crazy to stay out there alone.

When she opened her eyes, they were still on the interstate, heading into the city in the fast lane. The blazing copper sunset gilded the evening sky. In the rear view mirror her Prelude was two cars back. George veered across traffic onto an exit ramp and turned toward the neat, nondescript neighborhood where Kruffy lived in her boyfriend Charlie Constable's house. They had met when he was engaged to do some repair work at the cottage. When Anna argued over the bill, Charlie took her to small claims court and won. You marry that jerk, and you're off the payroll and out of my will, she'd threatened, and Kruffy, then sixty-two, succumbed to economics, as they all did, and pretended that she lived alone. Anna must have known; she knew everything about all of them except what Jennifer did in California. But it

would have pleased her to force Kruffy into duplicity.

George stopped his car in the drive and took Jennifer to the door of the house with his arm around her shoulders.

"Anna's dead," he blurted when Kruffy opened the door.

"Hush your mouth!" It was her most extreme expression of surprise. Anna used to deride her Alabama background. She herded them inside while George explained, in his rambling way, what had happened. Danny, who'd pulled in behind his father, joined them just before the door closed. It opened directly into the living room. Charlie Constable slipped out as they went in, still embarrassed, after two years, that he and Kruffy lived together without the convention of marriage.

"Charlie doesn't have to leave," George protested.

"He'd rather see his police shows," Kruffy said. They could hear the murmur of television through the thin wall. Short and overweight in shorts and shirt, her longish grey hair unfettered from the pins and clips that kept it up in the office, Kruffy ushered them to the table in a room extending from the kitchen and poured coffee. Her sharp black eyes were on Jennifer as she asked, "You feel better talking or you want to lie down?"

"I'm fine."

"You want a Valium?"

"No."

Krufty got Charlie's bottle of bourbon and poured a hefty shot into each of their coffee mugs. Then she bent down and hugged Jennifer, a short, hard hug that had the strength of the Rock of Gibraltar behind it. "You take your time, honey," she said. "Just drink your coffee and take your time."

Drinking the hot coffee and the potent whisky, Jennifer felt the chill leave her bones for the first time since she walked into Anna's cottage. She started her story, how she was driving down I-4, the exit to the cottage coming up, and decided to go there for a showdown with her grandmother.

"I was going to tell her I got a job in L.A."

"Hush your mouth!"

"I'll be damned," said George.

"Good for you, coz," Danny cried. "In the movie business?"

"A small production company. They make films for TV. I interviewed on my way to Hawaii." Anna's graduation gift. She wanted to take Jennifer on a whirlwind tour of Europe, the better to maneuver her onto A and M's staff; Jennifer fought for and won Hawaii on her own with a stopover in Los Angeles. "I guess I'll be the assistant to the assistant's assistant."

"You got your foot in the door,

that's all that matters," Danny said with enthusiasm. "God, Anna would have skinned you alive!"

Jennifer's face showed strain as she said, "I saw my dad while I was in L.A."

"You never did!" Krufty cried.

"She'd have cut you out of her will," Danny exulted. It was Anna's constant threat; every relative, every major charitable organization in the country and small ones close to home, every friend who'd done a favor and been promised delayed reward, they were all in and out of her will like people in a revolving door.

"She's dead, Danny," George reminded him. He sighed, his face and eyes heavy. "I always liked old Gary," he said. "How in the world did you find him?"

"He found out I was at school at Rollins through a private detective, called me there over a year ago. I was pretty bitter at first, but he kept calling. He said he tried to keep in touch with Mom and me. He even managed to get our home number one time, but Anna answered, hung up on him, and changed it." Anna changed her unlisted home phone number frequently, each time choosing not to give the new one to people she felt had crossed her. "He wrote letters years ago that I never got. He figured they were

intercepted. Did you know about that, Krufty?"

"I guess I did," Krufty acknowledged. "Look, I liked him. But he was weak, he drank, couldn't stand up to your grandma. That's not much of a husband, a father either."

"He was a good dad. I remember him taking me to buy shoes, going to the beach." Seven at the time of the divorce, she preserved her memories and expanded them.

"Spoiled you rotten," Krufty agreed. "I guess Anna did, too, in her way."

"She didn't even let him know my mother died." She was eleven, living in Anna's house with her mother since the divorce, continuing to live there after her mother's death from cancer until she went away to college, returning for vacations.

"Honey, he took off," Krufty protested. "Disappeared like he fell off the face of the earth."

"He said he reached a low point, he couldn't fight her any more. He drifted for a while, then he went into a treatment center. He hasn't had a drink in ten years. He went back to teaching high school. He hated working for Anna."

"Don't we all," Danny murmured, and corrected himself. "Didn't we all." Sitting back, drumming his fingertips on the table, he said, "I was going to fly

the coop, too. Had an offer from New York, called them, and said I'd take it."

"That's great news, son," George cried. "I'm proud of you!"

A look passed between father and son. Their bond was the one good thing left in this family, Jennifer reflected, the sole hold-out from a pattern of divorce and death. It was for his dad's sake that Danny hadn't rebelled earlier. George and Krufty, subjugated at a time that Anna really needed them, couldn't break the chains.

"I'm happy for you, Danny," she said, and Krufty added, "I'm sure glad you two had the guts to defy her. I never did, all these years."

"You had a lot to lose," George consoled her, repeating his own longtime creed. "I guess we all did. I came close to leaving after Louise—after what happened to her, but what would I have done, going out to look for a job at my age?" After five years he still couldn't mention Aunt Louise's name without tears in his eyes.

"She has a lot to answer for," Krufty said, "but I wouldn't wish my worst enemy to die the way she did."

That jolted them out of the past. Krufty offered more coffee but capped the bourbon on the grounds that the men had to drive home.

"I guess we'd better be on our way," George said. "I need to make some calls before people see it on the news. Will you call the office people, Krufty, tell 'em what happened, ask them to go to work as usual on Monday? And will you go in tomorrow? I know it's Sunday, but Detective Lamar wants to look through Anna's office. You know more about it than anybody else." Usually it rankled with him that Anna kept him in the dark; tonight it was a relief.

Krufty said that she'd go. They all hugged, and the men went home.

Always she fled to Krufty when she was in disfavor with her grandmother, and Krufty, who wouldn't stand up for herself, took her side against Anna. Krufty fought for all of them, for Danny and George, too, for Jennifer's mother Sonia when she was alive, for poor Aunt Louise. You just want to rule everybody's life! she yelled, and Anna yelled back, It's none of your business, so get out if you don't like it! Other underlings would have been fired, but she always gave Krufty an option. And Krufty, with too much to lose, with a sick husband in the early years, grasped it and stayed on as Anna's secretary, personal assistant, housekeeper on occasion, nursemaid, messenger,

chauffeur, name it and Krufty had done it.

That night, sitting on the single bed in Charlie's little guest room with Jennifer clenched tight under the sheet, she said, "You have to think of the good times, honey. Don't dwell on the bad."

Because there were good times. Staying up late on weekend nights in her grandmother's big bed with Krufty and a bowl of popcorn, waiting for Anna to come home from a party and tell them all about it. Anything Jennifer wanted for her birthday, a skating party, the tourist attractions, deep sea fishing, trips to the theater in New York after she fell in love with the lively arts. A psychologist to help her through her mother's slow dying, and no arguments from Anna during that time. Not that Anna didn't argue with everyone else, including her sick daughter, and tell the doctors how to do their job, but she was all compassion to the eleven-year-old girl. Even now Jennifer felt pangs of guilt for that old debt.

"I loved her, Krufty," she wept. "We fought all the time, but I loved her."

"Of course you did, honey. We all did. I guess she loved us, too, but she sure had a funny way of showing it."

"I keep seeing her on that

white rug in that red dress. I can't stand it."

"She didn't take any red dress," Kruffy said sharply. "All she ever took was jeans and shirts and underwear and pajamas and makeup and that silver she had to have out there. That's what I packed when she sent me to get her stuff. Took it all to the office so she could change into her jeans and go straight from there." Pressed designer jeans and silk shirts, the closest Anna ever got to casual.

"Maybe she kept a few clothes out there," Jennifer said.

"How many times did I tell her that? She wouldn't do it. More fun making me run back and forth with what she wanted." She clapped a hand over her mouth. "God forgive me for speaking ill of the dead!"

"She was wearing a red dress," Jennifer insisted. "Red silk, crossover bodice. I think she bought it the last time she was in Atlanta."

"Now I know you're wrong," Kruffy declared. "I took that one to the cleaner's Wednesday morning, picked it up Friday, carried it to her house in town. There's no way she was wearing that dress."

"Maybe she had two."

"She had no such thing. I know every stitch she bought."

"When were you last at the cottage?"

"End of July, last time she was out there. She left her stuff there as usual, sent me to get it. I was in her closet, I didn't see any red dress. You're just confused. All that blood—" She patted Jennifer's shoulder. "Don't think about it. Think of the good times."

On Sunday Danny helped to move her belongings into George's residence, a rambling old two story house on a lake outside the city in an unfashionable neighborhood of smaller houses. Aunt Louise loved the lake and the old house, and Anna made the down payment even though she disapproved of George's choices of wife and residence. Poor Aunt Louise was scared to death of her, of many things, in and out of psychiatric suites until she walked into the lake five years ago and drowned.

Since then the place had deteriorated into a state of what might be called comfortable chaos, George's slow-moving housekeeper only too glad to obey his orders not to touch this and that. Newspapers, pieces of clothing, George's murder mysteries and golf journals were all over the place, some of them still frosted with the white hairs of the old dog who died last year. Louise's paintings hung on



every wall, ethereal scenes of wraithlike women in flimsy clothes on swings hung by ropes of flowers. Danny stood in front of one of them on his way downstairs after he'd carried up the last piece of luggage.

"I hope she's in a place like that," he said.

For a moment Jennifer thought he meant Anna. Of course not. He meant his mother. The death certificate said "accidental," but George had accused Anna of driving his wife to drown herself. Danny didn't commit himself one way or the other, but Jennifer saw the bitterness in his eyes when he stared at his grandmother.

Downstairs George had been on the telephone all morning, and people were in and out with condolences and flowers and platters of food from supermarket delicatessens. Betty, the daily housekeeper summoned to work over the weekend, set out cold meats and salads on the table in the breakfast room, and intercepted callers and telephone calls so that the family could eat in peace. Kruffy came from her meeting with Lamar and stayed to lunch.

"He said he didn't find anything looked like it had any bearing on what happened," she reported. She took a roll from the basket being passed around and placed it on Jennifer's emp-

ty plate. "Eat. You have to keep your strength up."

"He won't find anything at the house either," George predicted. Jennifer was to meet the detective at her grandmother's house that afternoon. "It was some drifter talked his way in."

Anna wouldn't have let in a stranger, wouldn't open the door to anyone she didn't know. Jennifer didn't say it. They all knew it, but none of them wanted to contemplate the thought that Anna's murderer was someone she knew, someone they might know.

George was developing his theory. "He could have said he had something to do with the grove. He gets in, threatens her with that log, she puts up a fight, he hits her, gets scared, grabs the coffeepot so he has something for his trouble, takes off."

They sat at the round table in padded swivel chairs, one piled with newspapers swept off the table in order to set it. Kruffy, passing food, handed a dish of potato salad to Jennifer, who passed it on to Danny.

"All I have to say," Kruffy declared, "is we all better be able to say where we were yesterday."

"For God's sake," George protested, his voice a little higher than his usual throaty growl.

"You don't think he thinks it was one of us?"

"I don't know what he thinks, but he's no fool. He asked me where *I* was. I told him the truth, said I went grocery shopping in the morning, stayed home in the nice cool air the rest of the day, I never knew a summer like this one. Charlie can tell him I'm speaking the truth. We were home together."

"Did he ask about Friday?" Danny asked.

"So I told him I took off early. I always did when she wasn't there. I'm not ashamed of it, the hours I put in."

"Did he ask if I was at work?"

"I told him you called in sick."

"I stayed home to make phone calls. I called New York, accepted their offer, called a few people I wanted to tell right away. Tried to call you," grinning at Jennifer.

"I got your message, but you weren't home when I called back." Hey, coz, where are you when I need you? I'm going to fly the coop, and Dad won the program at Hilton Head. Call me for the thrilling details.

"I thought of going to the cottage, tell Anna I was quitting, have it out with her," Danny said. "Then I decided to have one more peaceful weekend, wait till she got back."

"She'd have been real upset,"

Kruffy said in the understatement of the century.

"He should have been in New York all along," George said. "Should have stayed up there after the Fashion Institute, when Lagerfeld wanted him."

Anna had paid for the Fashion Institute as she'd paid for private schools and private colleges for both grandchildren. You owe me, she said when Danny tried to explain his haute couture ambitions, and tied him to a contract that forbade his working for another company within five years of leaving A and M. The shorts and slacks and shirts her company made were well designed, cheaply made, competitively priced. Every season Anna gave Jennifer the full line, which Jennifer donated to the Salvation Army thrift shop. Wear them, Anna said, you have the build, it's good PR. I'm the CEO, I have to dress the part—flaunting before Danny the kind of sophisticated garments he wanted to create.

"It was Elisa who sent my designs out," Danny said. "Before we broke up. I'd stopped doing it."

He hadn't introduced Elisa to Anna until after they were engaged. Anna's first words to the beautiful young Cuban woman insulted her heritage. Danny, used to her nasty tongue, made the mistake of trying to laugh it

off. Elisa threw her ring at him and walked out. Her family, no more thrilled over the prospect of a cross-cultural marriage than Anna was, thwarted his attempts at reconciliation and sent her to live with relatives in Miami.

"Maybe you can get back with her," George suggested. "I always liked Elisa."

"That's where I was Friday. I drove to Miami, went to the place where she works. I told her what had happened, asked her to come to New York with me. She said she has a Cuban boyfriend now, they're going to get married. I blew my top, she called security, they threw me out." He'd spent the night in a motel and tried to see her the next morning, but her relatives called the police, who advised him to get out of town if he didn't want to be charged with stalking. "I hung around for awhile, had a few drinks, slept it off in my car before I hit the road. I'm not sure how long I was home before Dad called."

"You'd better make up your mind," Kruffy warned. "That detective wants to know every minute."

**"I** called Mr. Calieri," Lamar said, referring to the man who'd interviewed Jennifer at the Contemporary

on Saturday. "He said you got there at three o'clock, left maybe twenty after four."

And it took only an hour from there to the cottage, where she'd said she arrived at six.

"I went to the restaurant, had a hamburger," Jennifer explained. "I was too nervous to eat before I saw him." She didn't remember the name of the restaurant at the Contemporary. You didn't look for names, you saw people eating and went in.

"I talked to the caretaker," Lamar said. "He was gone all day Saturday; his daughter in Plant City had a baby."

They were at Anna's house in one of the city's prosperous residential neighborhoods, a medium-sized house, luxurious in some ways but without the pretensions of a grand mansion. Anna spent her money shrewdly; even at the cottage she made enough money from her orange groves to pay the taxes and the caretaker's salary and, in her own words, have some left to play with. In the town house original paintings by artists just beginning to be known, elegant contemporary furniture, hard-wearing carpets attested to her eye for style and value. The swimming pool carved squarely into the lawn was added when Jennifer and her mother went to live there.

Lamar had gotten there first. Anna's housekeeper, an efficient Cuban lady named Mirta, called back from her long weekend off, had let him in and showed him into Anna's study on the first floor. Jennifer, arriving five minutes late, joined him there. Here, as everywhere, the colors were grey and white and ice blue, the arrangements geometrical, the ambience neat. Anna threw out newspapers and magazines as soon as she read them and catalogued her mail in wooden file drawers. Each room reflected her passion for order in her life. Months ago she'd issued a refusal to set foot in George's house until he cleaned it up. Maybe that was why he kept it that way.

Lamar switched on Anna's answering machine. There were three calls, all concerning social engagements. Jennifer identified the callers, two women and a man. Not a romance, she assured him when he showed interest in the man. There were in Anna's social set a small number of single men willing to escort her to various functions in order to stay on her party list. She didn't make the latter observation aloud, and berated herself for thinking it.

"No calls for you," Lamar remarked.

"I had my own phone in my

room. I packed it when I moved to Uncle George's this morning."

"What was on your answering machine from yesterday?"

"A friend trying to make a tennis date and a lot of condolence calls from people who heard about Anna last night on the radio or TV. The tape was full."

"No message from your grandma?"

"No."

"Or other family members?"

She almost said yes, but it was on Friday that the message was there from Danny. "No," she said.

He asked if she knew Mr. Constable. She nodded. "Too bad they couldn't get married," he remarked, and paused for her to comment. She nodded again, and he dropped the subject, going through Anna's desk, asking questions about her business. Any problems she knew of, any fallings-out, any money her grandmother owed somebody or they owed her?

"I don't know a thing about the business end," Jennifer said. "Krufty would be the one to ask."

"I talked with her this morning. I thought maybe your grandma said something, argued with somebody, you heard her on the phone."

"I've been away at college the past five years."

"You've been through since May," he pointed out.

"I did some summer stock in Connecticut; then I went to Hawaii, got back from there a week ago. Anna worked every day, and I was out in the evening quite a bit. Sometimes we didn't see each other for whole days."

"You got along okay, did you?"

"I told you, she was upset that I got my degree in theater. She wanted me in the business." Her mind did a vivid replay of last Wednesday night, Anna so sweet, as if the bitter fights had never taken place, as if Jennifer had agreed to work for A and M. You're creative with words the way Danny is with his designs, I'm giving you your own in-house department, you'll handle all our advertising, do your own hiring and firing, name your own salary. I want a career in film or theater, Jennifer had said, and left the house when the screaming began. Don't think you'll get a penny in my will, Anna yelled after her, and the next day went to the cottage to brood over her granddaughter's colossal selfishness and plot a way to thwart it.

Lamar continued to ask questions. "But she didn't ask you out to the cottage so you could talk it out?"

"She went there to get away from everything." Watches TV,

reads trashy books, walks around that pond, eats TV dinners, Krufty derided.

"What about her private life?" He held up Anna's looseleaf address book bound in a tapestry cover.

"They're all in there, all her friends' addresses and telephone numbers. All up to date. The one at the cottage is a duplicate."

"No erasures," he remarked, leafing through it. "Most folks have people die, move away."

"If there were any changes Krufty made a whole new page, threw away the old one."

"She drop people often?" he queried, and asked for a list of those she'd dropped lately. Again Jennifer said that Krufty knew better than she did, and he observed, "Miss Kruft sure did a lot for her."

He asked her to take him through the house and point out anything unusual, even if she thought it had no bearing on her grandmother's murder, and to reconstruct conversations with Anna after she got back from Hawaii. Did Miss Seegstrom seem apprehensive or moody or in any way not herself? Who came to the house, and who did she go out with? Was she upset with anybody? How did she get along with her housekeeper, her family, the people at the office? Was it true,

as Miss Krufft told him, that all the family members had keys to this house but only Miss Seegstrom had a key to the cottage?

Answering him, she struggled to keep her voice even and her demeanor cool, to be careful and at the same time not to sound premeditated. Something was growing inside her, defiance tempered by fear, fostered at least in part by the knowledge that he was asking other people the same questions about her that he asked her about them. It was a violation. She needed to protect herself. Answer his questions, but don't volunteer a thing. Stick to the theory that it was an itinerant. Don't drag in things that will make him stay here longer.

And so she didn't mention the red dress when she showed him Anna's closet, but after he left, she went back upstairs to it. Adjoining the master bedroom, it had been a small guest room until Anna had it fitted with wall-to-wall rods and floor-to-ceiling shelves and cupboards. Evening clothes were on one side, day clothes in the rest of the space, grouped by season and color, all shades of every color except yellow and orange. She found the summer reds. Five outfits, but no silk dress with crossover bodice. There weren't two, only the one Krufft said she'd picked

up from the cleaners on Friday and hung here, the one Anna died in.

How many times had Anna called one of them from the cottage, I'm bored, come and take me out to dinner. Too bad if you had another engagement; well, cancel it, God knows. I don't ask for much! Go to the house, get this dress, no, that suit, navy shoes, no beige, the closed toe not the sandals, there's a matching purse, the little one, don't bring me that big thing, be here at five sharp. She liked to dine early, allowed no cocktails and only one glass of wine.

The scene played through her mind as she drove home. Anna ordering her red dress and eel-skin purse, changing as she carried on a conversation from the bedroom, taking offense, screaming insults and chasing her caller out of the house. Only this time the caller grabbed a log from the pile and followed her back. She could hear her grandmother's jeer, you don't have the guts to hit me, hear the squelch of blood and bone against the weapon, feel the panic rising as the assailant realized that Anna was dead. Grab something, make it look like robbery, get out get out get out.

Lower the thermostat on the way to the door. That could have helped all of them, Danny, George, herself. None of them

had a decent alibi. All of them were on the road. Maybe a good defense attorney could produce a waitress at the Contemporary who remembered her, a bartender to vouch for Danny, someone at the golf tournament who'd spoken to George, but she doubted that, at this point, Lamar would go to that much trouble. He'd wait until he had a suspect and try to find a witness who'd make his case, not break it.

Surely she was in the clear. She'd hardly change the thermostat in order to give herself an alibi and then report the crime immediately. Unless she was so devious that she saw it as a way to deflect suspicion.

Lamar hadn't mentioned the dress, which meant that Krufty hadn't mentioned it to him. There could be a simple explanation. Maybe Krufty was supposed to get it on Thursday and forgot, Anna picked it up herself en route to the cottage, intending to confront Krufty with her negligence later, and Krufty lied about it rather than admit that she'd forgotten.

There were big holes in that theory, but she was too tense, and too determined to believe in George's itinerant, to pick them out. A horn blasted; she'd slid through a red light. Pull yourself together, Jennifer. In a

week things will settle down, and you'll be out of here.

**"H**e asked me who inherited the estate," George said on the way to the lawyer's office in his car on Monday afternoon. "I said I guessed we did."

"Depends on if we were in or out," Danny said caustically, and George protested, "I can't believe Anna would leave her property away from the family."

He was right. The basic framework, which Anna had described years ago and threatened so often to change, was still in place. The three of them, George, Danny, and Jennifer, inherited equal shares of the business. The Seegstrom Trust provided lifetime incomes to them and to Krufty, which reverted to charity after their deaths. There were more than thirty small bequests of jewelry and private belongings to those friends still in favor.

"I guess we're all in agreement to sell the business," George said on the way home. "Sportswear Unlimited made a damn good offer a couple years back. I doubt if it's still on the table, but I'll do my best. I told Anna the longer she held out the worse things would get, but she never listened to me on anything."



"I thought she was holding out for the highest bidder," Jennifer said.

"That was her story," Danny scoffed. "She'd never have sold. She'd have hung on and let the company go into Chapter Eleven before she'd have given up the hold she had on all of us."

"She's dead, Danny," George said placatingly. "Let's give her the benefit of the doubt."

"She'd have sued me over that five-year clause in my contract," Danny predicted.

George shifted his bulky body behind the wheel, swerving toward a car in the next lane as he did so. "I hope you didn't tell the detective about that," he said.

Danny laughed. "He told me. She had it on file at the office. I see, Mr. Seegstrom, your grandma had you sign an agreement you wouldn't work for some other clothing manufacturer for five years."

His imitation of Lamar's laconic style was so good that Jennifer almost laughed. But it was no laughing matter. Anna would have sued, and Danny's new employer would have been barred from hiring him. Now the contract could be torn up.

"It's over," she said. "We're all free."

For a few seconds no one spoke; then George, slowing to a sedate thirty-five as a police car fell in behind him from an inter-

section, said, "You all agree we should sell, then?"

"Sure thing," Danny said. "It'll be nice to go to New York rich. How about you, coz?"

"The sooner the better," Jennifer said. "I'd have left here broke." The small inheritance left by her mother had paid for the fifth year at Rollins. "And on foot," she added, for Anna, parsimonious with cash and a genius at tying strings to her gifts, had registered the Prelude in her own name.

"I'm retiring," Kruffy declared when she dropped in at George's after work. They congregated in his small, untidy study. The rest of the house was filled with friends. "I'll stay on till it's settled, then I'm going to buy a nice little motor home so me and Charlie can take some trips. He's tickled to death we can get married now. That's really bothered him."

"I have to be in L.A. on October first," Jennifer said. "What about you, Danny?"

"They said the first of the year's okay but if I can make it sooner that's great. I want to get up there, find a place to live." He grimaced. "I guess it could be years before they actually settle the estate, huh?"

"They'll make partial payments," George predicted. "You need money, come to me. You too, Jenny."

"I'm okay," she said. "I took for too long."

"Not as much as we did," Danny murmured. "We took the goodies, and we took the crap. I guess to get to this point where it's all ours."

"That's enough," George protested. "We'd give it all back in a minute if it would bring her back, you know that."

He didn't sound convincing. They had all relaxed after the visit to the lawyer. Beyond the closed door people were eating and drinking and telling jokes. Even at her mother's funeral they'd done that, Jennifer remembered. It upset her, and Anna had sent everybody home. Later she could excuse such behavior as a reaction to the fact that her mother's suffering was over. But Anna hadn't been sick a day in her life. Relief that they were free of her? Is that why she sat here with a scotch and soda while her companions downed their own drinks and voiced their fantasies?

The telephone rang, but only briefly. The housekeeper was answering it in the kitchen, taking messages. This time she came into the room:

"It's that detective," she reported. "I thought you'd want to talk to him."

They knew from George's side of the conversation what he was going to say after he hung up.

"I'm meeting him at the cottage. He wants you two to go with me."

"Do we have to?" Jennifer asked. "I never want to see that place again as long as I live."

"He said they have some new information."

She had to go, of course. Refusing friends' offers to drive them, they went in the BMW 325 convertible that had been Danny's college graduation gift from his grandmother, registered in his own name, the bribe which, together with a down payment on his condominium, made his contract acceptable. Jennifer's Prelude was for high school graduation. Her defiance forfeited a new car to celebrate the end of college; she'd been lucky to get the trip to Hawaii, which she accepted for the opportunity to look for work in California. Should have taken a chance and moved out there cold. She was too cautious, too careful, never kept a boyfriend beyond three months. All that was going to change.

The crime tape across the road into the grove was dragging in the dust to let them enter. Lamar, already there with his sergeant, had also suspended the tape around the cottage and across the door, which he opened as soon as he heard their car. Inside, the air was at

a reasonable temperature. Still, Jennifer shivered when she went in and avoided looking at the stain on the rug. On the way to the cottage George had said they'd have the place sanitized as soon as Lamar released it.

They sat at the dinette table while he loomed over them. The sergeant stood at ease in the living room with her hands behind her back.

"I asked you out here to give you a progress report," he said. "Not that we've made a whole lot. I did talk to the caretaker, he said he wasn't aware Miss Seegstrom was expecting company. Usually she'd tell him so he'd know it was okay for a car to be going through the grove. She wasn't very happy when he called Saturday morning and told her he'd be gone all day."

He paused as if he expected them to comment. Danny said, "She didn't like surprises."

"He said he never knew when she was coming," Lamar remarked. "Said she'd just appear out of nowhere, stay two, three days, leave. She'd tell him she was leaving, not when she was coming."

The better to check up on you, my dear. Anna was suspicious of everyone who worked for her; she said it was what made her a good executive.

"We do have one piece of new information," Lamar continued.

"The medical examiner says she wasn't killed by that log. It was sitting in a pool of blood but there were no bone fragments, bits of flesh. It was put there to throw us off the track so we wouldn't look for the real weapon. He said that was probably smaller."

They were silent. Jennifer felt the tingle of fear that accompanied any revelation that threatened to complicate the case. She wanted it to be over and put in the past.

Lamar was waiting for them to comment. When they didn't, he said, "Reason I called you out here is so you can look around again, tell me if anything that could have been used to attack her is missing."

They went singly, accompanied by Sergeant Cleaver, each of them reporting that everything looked intact.

"Unless—" George began. He'd gone last on the tour of the house and walked back now, frowning, to the fireplace. Sergeant Cleaver restrained his hand when he reached toward the set of handsome fire irons fitted into grooves in a rack of shining brass. "Sorry, sir, don't touch anything if you don't mind."

"I was just pointing," George explained and frowned again. "I don't know if they're all there or not. What do you think?" He

looked at Jennifer and Danny as he asked the question.

"That's the usual set," Danny said. "Shovel, tongs, poker. There's no place for anything else."

"I thought she had another poker. Last time I was here was in the winter, she had a fire. It seemed to me this set was for show, she had an old black poker she used to prod the logs with. It was leaning up against the fireplace, had a sort of big knob on top."

Danny said, "I was never here in the winter."

"You, Miss Palmer?"

"I've been here when she had a fire," Jennifer said reluctantly. "But I don't remember what kind of poker she used, or if she used any."

"That the kind of thing she'd do, have one for show and a beatup one to use?"

Not really. Anna was a perfectionist, nothing but the best. But she hated to abuse her possessions, at least the inanimate ones. Who was to say she didn't have two pokers, and who cared? Jennifer just wanted to go home.

George meandered through a reply that said in essence that he was just about sure that Anna kept an old black poker up against the fireplace. "If he heard Jenny's car coming and he had it in his hand, he'd take

off without even knowing he was still holding it," he theorized. "Did you search the grove?"

"We looked around," Lamar acknowledged. "Sure didn't find a poker. Miss Seegstrom's coffee pot didn't show up in the pawnshops either, not yet."

They went outside. Lamar locked the door, and Sergeant Cleaver replaced the tape. The broiling sun wilted Jennifer's hair. The grass that had been so green on Saturday was metamorphosing into straw. The caretaker must have turned off the sprinkler system Anna had used with such disregard for the law. A hundred feet away the green grove drooped in the heat. Closer to the cottage, the pond had contracted within its sloping banks until it resembled a muddy eye sunk in a crusty brown skull.

"We don't get some rain, that's going to dry right up," Lamar remarked. "Make it easier for the diver, we decide to send one in."

"You keep a guard on the place?" George asked.

"Don't have the manpower, sir. Patrols check when they have time; caretaker said he'd keep his eyes open, call us if anybody goes into the grove."

They spoke little on the way home, as if, Jennifer thought,

they realized that all the rationalizations they had built to block the truth were crumbling. Derelicts breaking into a house to steal didn't react the way this murderer had. Killing by accident and scared by the sound of an approaching car, a thief would grab Anna's purse to pay for his trouble, not a piece of silver he'd have to pawn. And he wouldn't take the time, wouldn't have the time, to lower the thermostat and plant a piece of wood from the pile outside.

But it wasn't a premeditated murder. How many times had all of them, crawling away from a battle with Anna, said, I could kill her? How many times had she, Jennifer, said it herself? That's why, that Saturday afternoon, she'd wanted to get the inevitable showdown behind her, be screamed at and scream back and head for California. The sounds of fury rang in her ears, Anna's voice yelling, This is the thanks I get! Well, don't think you're taking that car, that's mine!, you're just like your father the drunk! She could feel Anna behind her as she fled, chasing her outside still screaming insults, never did appreciate a thing!, don't think you can get the best of me, nobody has yet and nobody will! So many times it had happened that way. The wonder wasn't that at last someone turned and chased her back

inside and bludgeoned her to death, but that it hadn't happened sooner.

Lamar knew that her car was registered in Anna's name. Did he know that all of them had Anna's temper? While he played charades with them at the cottage, were his underlings grilling their friends? He'd read the contract Danny had signed; did he also know about Elisa? Did he see Danny, stoked by past grievances, trying to reason with Anna about his new job, suddenly exploding? And did he know that dear old Uncle George was slow to boil but livid when he did? Did he think that George went to plead for his son and had his pleas thrown back in his face? That theory wouldn't work; George didn't know then about the offer from New York. But there were plenty of old scores for George to settle.

Even Kruffy, trying so hard to please and never pleasing, might be suspect, and Charlie Constable, forced, as he saw it, into a life of sin. Once in a while Kruffy sent him on errands to the cottage. Not when Anna was there, though. She wouldn't have sent him with the red dress.

Lamar didn't know about that. It would come up. He'd ask one of his innocuous questions—She always take a good dress along with her jeans?—and she

and Kruffy would be faced with withholding evidence.

She shivered, and realized that Danny was turning his car into his father's drive. They'd driven all the way home without speaking, each of them locked in thought.

"I won't come in," Danny said. "I need to get some things done before I fly the coop." The same expression he'd used in the message he left on her machine last Friday, before all hell broke loose. "If they let me go," he added before he drove away.

"I think I'll go over to Kate's, see if she'll walk the beach with me," Jennifer told her uncle after Danny's car vanished down the street. "I'm getting stir-crazy."

"Sure thing, do you good," he said, and sighed as he looked toward his house. "I sure hope they don't stay too long," he said.

Two people had to move their cars so that she could back hers out. There wasn't room for it in the garage; in addition to his big blue Cadillac, George had a grey Taurus station wagon he used for golf. His clubs, usually kept at his golf club, had been in the back of the wagon since he got back from Hilton Head, contained in the red leather bag Aunt Louise had given him years ago, all of them except the

number five he said he wrapped around a tree.

Belted in, she sped down the quiet street and turned left, toward I-4, the way she thought Danny had gone. The evening sky was peach and turquoise, the sun behind her as she raced east. In an hour it would be down. She drove faster, exited on the right side of the highway and turned left underneath it, into the splendid sunset.

Before she reached the dirt lane beside the caretaker's house, she branched onto a country road, a stretch of pitted asphalt that marked the perimeter of Anna's groves. Her breath stopped momentarily when, a few yards along, she spotted Danny's BMW pulled off the road onto undeveloped land behind a scrawny pine. She stopped her own car behind it and charged into the grove.

It was hard going. She hadn't changed since they left the lawyer's office, still wore her short white dress and small-heeled sandals. The dry dirt filmed her feet. The canopy of dense green leaves kept out the sun but not the suffocating heat. Here and there a brilliant ray perforated the gloom and made her blink when she crossed it. Then she was out of the grove and into the clearing, with the sun's last brilliant display illuminating the sky above the distant trees.

The cottage was a few yards away on her left. She slogged past it, sweat converting into mud the dust that covered her limbs. The ground inclined toward the sunken pond, only a few feet wide now. Local folklore said that it had been formed by a sinkhole and was bottomless in the center, but Danny stood in the middle of it with water just under his armpits. She saw his shoes lying on the grass. He was moving slowly in his pale shirt, his back to her, a step at a time, stopping between each step, groping, she thought, with his foot as he made a slow circle.

It was fortunate that the water wasn't deeper. Danny had never liked water sports, knew only the barest rudiments of swimming. Sissy, Anna said derisively. The setting sun shed gold sequins on the muddy water as Jennifer stood unobserved at the rim of the pond. He stopped his groping suddenly, took a deep breath and submerged, holding his nose, came up spluttering with an object in his free hand, a coffeepot, Anna's silver coffeepot crusted in mud. For a moment he looked at it, then turned to throw it onto the hard cracked earth and saw her.

Jennifer faced him from the water's edge. His pale face was soaked in sweat, his shirt above mid-chest clinging to his shoul-

ders. The rest of him was hidden in the muddy water.

He grinned and said lightly, "Fishing. The big one got away."

"The big one's still in there. Lamar'll find it. He'll be out here tomorrow."

"By then it'll be gone."

He turned away from her and began his slow circling again, widening his scope, groping with his foot, moving on. Jennifer walked around the pond so that she was facing him and moved when he did.

"The sun'll be down soon," she said. "You can't keep this up all night."

"Full moon." He was panting slightly. "You'd better go home, coz. The werewolves will be out."

"What are you going to do if you find it?"

"Get rid of it."

"You believe in getting away with murder?"

"She asked for it."

"Nobody asks to have their head bashed in."

"What do you know?" he cried, and for a split second she saw the rage that existed in this family like a knifeblade sheathed in the polite conventions of everyday life. Except in Anna, who thought she never had to sheathe anything. Danny composed his face and said, as he continued to move and grope, "You saw a different side of her. I'm not saying that out of envy. God knows I



wouldn't have wanted to have to live with her. But at least for you she had a good side. All we ever got was Lady Macbeth on the warpath whenever she came over for a visit. Do you have any idea how terrified of her my poor mother was?"

"I know, Danny. Anna could have made things a lot easier for her."

"My dad blamed himself for that, for not standing up to her." He kept moving, treading the mud, moving on. "Blamed himself for letting me sign that contract, thought he let me down."

"He's still broken up about Aunt Louise."

"You were the smart one. I was jealous, thought you were her pet, then you started to defy her and I thought, Right on! I was still jealous, though. You have more guts than I have."

The sun was slipping down behind the trees, filling the sky with the brilliance of its dying. The heat was still oppressive. Sweat streamed down Danny's face.

"I loved Elisa." His voice was very soft. "I knew Anna would go berserk if I took anybody home who wasn't two hundred percent northern European; Elisa knew her family wouldn't accept a gringo. Us against the world. It felt great. Then I blew it. You remember what Anna said? Most of my seamstresses are Cuban.

Do you sew? I was so used to her nasty tongue I didn't even take it as an insult, I just tried to laugh it off. Ruined my life."

"I know what you're saying, Danny, but it's still murder. Not premeditated. A crime of passion."

She could see it in her mind and hear the voices. The phone call from the car because Anna didn't like surprises. Glad of the diversion and compelled to control it, she gave her orders. You can take me out to dinner, go by the house and get my red dress and a thousand other things, be here at five. She'd carry on the conversation from the bedroom as she changed into the dress, hear of Danny's job offer and come out screaming. I'll sue, nobody breaks a contract with me! Get out of here, chasing him outside in her fury, deriding him when he turned with a weapon in his hand, you don't have the guts to hit me.

But he was out of control, chased her back into the house, and hit her so hard that she dropped, bleeding, to the rug. Devastated when he realized what he'd done, he tried to make it look like a robbery by scattering the silver and taking the coffeepot. Jittery, afraid of being found there, he threw the coffeepot and the weapon into the pond and only then realized that if the weapon was missing

that was the first place the police would look. So he put the log beside her in the pool of her blood but didn't have the heart to hit her with it.

She opened her mouth to tell Danny that she understood and was stopped by his under-the-breath sound of jubilation. He ducked below the surface of the water and came up with something in his hand, something long and slender and covered with mud. The number five George said he'd broken at Hilton Head. The club he grabbed from his car when Anna chased him, that he wielded in his rage, that he used to smash her head.

**"H**ow did you know?" Danny asked.

Night had dropped, fast and breathless. The moon he'd promised rose in the sky like a huge orange world. They sat beside the pond. Danny had thrown the coffeepot back into the water. The golf club lay beside him on the ground.

"I thought it was you at first," Jennifer said. "I thought Uncle George couldn't have gone to plead with her to void your contract because he didn't know about the New York offer till after the murder. Then I remembered your phone message on

Friday. You said you were going to fly the coop and your dad won the pro-am. The only way you could have known that was if you'd talked to him at Hilton Head, and the reason you'd have called him there was to tell him about New York."

"Clever coz," he murmured, but his face in the moonlight was grim.

"I remember how you looked at each other at Kruffy's when you said you had this offer and George said it was wonderful news. I thought it was fatherly pride. But he was letting you know he didn't want you to say he knew about it earlier. With all the people there for the tournament it would be hard to prove he left Hilton Head earlier than he said. He admitted that he called Anna from his car because they could have traced that call, so he said he called to tell her he was on his way home. Actually he made an appointment to see her and she told him to pick up her red dress. He wanted to break the news before you had to, to plead with her."

"Crazy," he said softly. "As if she'd listen."

"I thought of the golf club he said he broke, and I knew you'd think of it, too. Then Lamar said the pond might dry up."

"And you thought I'd charge out here to the rescue."

Lamar might think that, too.

She kept looking over her shoulder, hoping the police cars would burst out of the grove so that she wouldn't have to cope with this. "He must have read about turning down the thermostat in one of his murder mysteries. It would give him an alibi if he was on the highway at the time Anna was supposed to have died. But he didn't stop to think that she wouldn't have been wearing that red dress earlier in the day, or that somebody had to take it to her."

"Poor old dad. He never was much good at details." He looked into her face. "I'm not going to turn him in," he said, "and neither are you."

"He has to turn himself in, Danny. We'll get him a lawyer—"

"No way. There are a lot worse criminals than my dad out there walking the streets."

"Can you imagine what he's going through, what he's been going through ever since Aunt Louise died? He needs to be in a hospital. That's what will happen. He won't go to jail."

"Florida's not particularly sympathetic to the insanity defense, especially if you kill your mother."

"A good lawyer can make it stick."

At the very worst it was unpremeditated, second degree murder, not subject to the death penalty. That wasn't much comfort, and so she didn't say it.

"I can't go to New York now," Danny said. "I can't leave him."

"If you don't go, it will all have been for nothing."

"It's too late. I should have gone a long time ago."

A sound rumbled far away that hadn't been heard in Florida for several weeks, the warning sound of thunder. She waited for Danny to make one of his facetious remarks, but he said nothing. A cloud obscured the moon, and a breath of wind stirred the still water. It felt like a sigh on her arms.

Danny reached for the golf club and stood up suddenly. He walked to the edge of the pond and threw the club hard into the middle. The splash sounded clearly in the humid night.

"They can find their own damn evidence," he said.

The first fat splotches of warm rain fell on them as they ran through the grove to where they had left their cars.

# UNSOLVED

by  
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the January issue.*

Monday morning. The day was already hot and muggy as only Chicago can be in early August. Just the kind of weather when every office in our old building pushes the air conditioning as far as the needle goes—and predictably blows the master fuse. No electricity, no electric fan, no relief. Which explains why I'm sitting with both windows and my door open, hoping Ma Nature can spare a little breeze off Lake Michigan.

I look up to see him standing in the hallway trying to make up his mind whether to come in. I was sure I'd seen his picture in the *Tribune*. More than once. Still, at that moment I couldn't fix a name to the rotund little man with thin sandy hair combed straight over his dome and clutching a briefcase in his chubby right hand. He decided to enter.

"Millard Barlowe?" he inquired.

"Yeah, that's me," I answered. "You got a problem?" It was pretty obvious he had a problem from the creases across his forehead, not to mention the fact that he had come to the Barlowe Detective Agency. That's yours truly.

"My whole *Kitten* is missing—just when I was ready to start casting for it," the guy blurted out.

If this jerk was nutty enough to go fly fishing for his pet cat, I thought, no wonder it took off.

"Better try the S.P.C.A.," I suggested. "They're good at lost cats."

"No, no, no, you misunderstand," he said impatiently, like I'm a reject from the funny farm. "*Kitten* is the new musical production I'm directing. Everything's missing from my safe—the musical score, the orchestral arrangements, the choreography, the lyrics, everything."

Then it finally dawned on me. This little man was Emilio Moganni, the big stage director, producer, and whatever from the Majestic Theater.

"Sorry, Mr. Moganni," I said. (I apologize quickly when his kind

of money is in the wings.) "Perhaps you'd better start at the beginning. When was your safe burglarized?"

"That's part of the problem, sir. I really don't know. I can only say sometime last week."

"Let me get this straight. You've got this big play coming up and you don't look at the necessary stuff all week?"

"It was that Midwest Mixed Amateur Contest," he explained. "Young couples performed a special act on the stage of my theater, with the winner of each division awarded a week's appearance on-stage with pay. Despite the pressures of *Kitten*, I agreed to be the judge. I scheduled a different group each day, Monday through Saturday—ballet, comedy, magic acts, piano duets, tap dancing, and vocalists—but not necessarily in that order. At the end of each day I invited the winning pair to visit with me in my office, an opportunity for public relations, which never hurt anyone's reputation."

"I was so busy all week I had scarcely a moment even to think about *Kitten*. It wasn't until this morning that I opened the safe. Empty! I couldn't believe it at first. Empty!"

"No forced entry?" I asked.

"None. I keep my inner sanctum locked when I'm not present. I'm sorry to say it has to be one of the winning contestants. It really shakes my faith in today's youth. But I can't understand how anyone opened the safe. Or why they would want to steal *Kitten*."

"I take it that what was stolen is valuable?"

He glared. His eyes swept over me like prison searchlights. "*Valuable*? I'll say it's valuable! Months of preparation by the author, the stage foreman, the composer—yes, quite valuable."

"My guess," I said, "is that the thief or thieves will soon contact you asking for a substantial reward for its return. Probably *very* substantial."

"Oh dear. Well, I'd give all my savings—even borrow money—just to keep *Kitten* on schedule."

"That may not be necessary. Suppose you tell me all about this amateur contest."

He pulled a silk handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed daintily at the perspiration streaming down his face. Each competing couple, he informed me, came from a different city (one came from Huntington, Indiana), and one of the young women was named Ellen. He also mentioned a contestant named Miss Ulman.

From Moganni's disconnected account I also learned the following:

(1) In each of the winning pairs the man and the woman had different first initials, so Andrew wasn't with Alice, Bart wasn't with Becky, and so on.

(2) Mr. Queen performed exactly two days after the man from Kankakee (who didn't do the comedy routine) and exactly two days before the partner of Miss Wilson (who wasn't Dotty). Their first names were Andrew, Bart, and Claude. None of them competed in the tap dancing. Mr. Queen wasn't the man from Gary.

(3) Miss Xander went onstage the day after Frank's partner and the day before Mr. Rowley's partner (who wasn't Miss Wilson). Their first names were Alice, Clara, and Flora. Clara didn't perform with Mr. Noonan.

(4) The couple from Gary (who did not include Mr. Rowley) did their act the day after Donald (whose partner was not Clara) and the day before Becky and her partner (who weren't from Kankakee). They were, in one order or another, the vocalists, the piano duet (played by Miss Smith and her partner), and the magician and his assistant (who didn't perform on Thursday).

(5) Edward (who wasn't one of the tap dancers), Miss Tritt, and Clara (who was not one of the couple doing the comedy routine) came from Indianapolis, Jackson, and Laporte. Becky wasn't the woman from Laporte, and Clara wasn't the partner of Mr. Olson.

(6) Mr. Noonan (who isn't Claude) went onstage later in the week than Mr. Moore (who did not come from Jackson) but some time before Mr. Peters (who was not one of the vocalists).

(7) Miss Vanpohl did not do her act on Monday or Saturday. The Laporte woman (who wasn't Flora) did not go onstage on Tuesday. Andrew (whose partner wasn't Dotty) did not perform on Friday.

I scanned my notes. The males' last names were Moore, Noonan, Olson, Peters, Queen, and Rowley. The females' last names were Smith, Tritt, Ulman, Vanpohl, Wilson, and Xander.

In minutes I'd figured out the whole week's schedule and the names of the winning couple in each event. But that didn't solve the case.

"Got any photos of these winners?" I asked.

Emilio Moganni fumbled with the latch of his briefcase and brought out a handful of glossy prints. "These were taken onstage, publicity shots for the winners' hometown newspapers."

I sorted through them. In each, little Emilio posed proudly hugging the winners, the arm around the young woman noticeably tighter than the one around her partner. All at once something struck me. (My mama didn't raise a dummy.)

"Who's this guy?" I asked, pointing to one of the photos.

"Oh, that's the magician. Charming fellow."

"He's no amateur," I declared. "That guy is Joe Svoboda, recently released from Joliet where he was serving time for grand theft. He used to be billed as Magellan the Magician."

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Moganni (his favorite expression). "But how could he have opened my safe? I was with him all the time in my office."

"I don't think he did. *You* did."

"What? What's that you're saying?" The little man's blood pressure skyrocketed. "I'll have you know—"

"Hold it," I cut him off. "I know all about Magellan the Magician. The highlight of his program was to coax some unsuspecting volunteer up from the audience so he could hypnotize him. He'd get the poor boob to make an ass of himself while the audience whooped it up. Afterward the guy didn't know he'd done anything—posthypnotic suggestion erased all that from his memory."

"Oh dear. I can hardly believe it's possible. Now I suppose I'll have to ransom *Kitten* from him."

"Not yet, sir. I'll contact his 'lovely assistant' and tell her what life is like in women's prison. Maybe throw in a few gruesome details."

It all worked out perfectly. As I'd anticipated, the cute little gal didn't fancy the idea of steel bars between her and the other kind of bars. She quickly surrendered all the materials Svoboda had stashed with her.

Thus *Kitten* came home, to the delight of Emilio Moganni. And I wasn't unhappy with the *very* generous award he paid me. Not at all!

*Under what name was the insidious hypnotist operating?  
Who was his girlfriend? Where did they live?*

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See page 153 for the solution to the November puzzle.



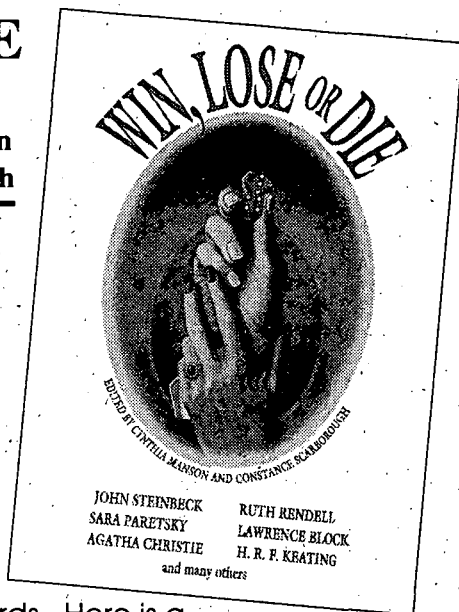
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FICTION

# THE WEEKENDER

Jeffery Deaver



Illustration by Dan Krowatin

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 12/96

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I looked in the rear view mirror and didn't see any lights, but I knew they were after us and it was only a matter of time till I'd see the cops.

Toth started to talk, but I told him to shut up and got the Buick up to eighty. The road was empty, nothing but pine trees for miles around.

"Oh brother," Toth muttered. I felt his eyes on me, but I didn't even want to look at him, I was so mad.

They were never easy, drugstores.

Because, just watch sometime, when cops make their rounds they cruise drugstores more often than anyplace else. Because of the prescription drugs.

You'd think they'd stake out convenience stores. But those're a joke, and with the closed circuit TV you're going to get your picture took, you just are. So nobody who knows the business, I mean really *knows* it, hits them. And banks, forget banks. Even ATM's. I mean, how much can you clear? Three, four hundred tops? And around here the Fast Cash button gives you twenty bucks. Which tells you something. So why even bother?

No. We wanted cash and that meant a drugstore, even though they can be tricky. Ardmore Drugs. Which is a big store in a little town. Liggett Falls. Sixty

miles from Albany and a hundred or so from where Toth and me lived, farther west into the mountains. Liggett Falls is a poor place. You'd think it wouldn't make sense to hit a store there. But that's exactly why—because like everywhere else people there need medicine and hairspray and makeup only they don't have credit cards. Except maybe a Sears or Penney's. So they pay cash.

"Oh brother," Toth whispered again. "Look."

And he made me even madder, him saying that. I wanted to shout look at what, you son of a bitch? But then I could see what he was talking about, and I didn't say anything. Up ahead. It was like just before dawn, light on the horizon. Only this was red, and the light wasn't steady. It was like it was pulsing, and I knew that they'd got the roadblock up already. This was the only road to the interstate from Liggett Falls. So I should've guessed.

"I got an idea," Toth said. Which I didn't want to hear but I also wasn't going to go through another shootout. Sure not at a roadblock where they was ready for us.

"What?" I snapped.

"There's a town over there. See those lights? I know a road'll take us there."

Toth's a big guy, and he looks

calm. Only he isn't really. He gets shook easy, and he now kept turning around, skittish, looking in the back seat. I wanted to slap him and tell him to chill.

"Where's it?" I asked. "This town?"

"About four, five miles. The turnoff, it ain't marked. But I know it."

This was that lousy upstate area where everything's green. But dirty green, you know. And all the buildings're gray. These gross little shacks, pickups on blocks. Little towns without even a 7-Eleven. And full of hills they call mountains but aren't.

Toth cranked down the window and let this cold air in and looked up at the sky. "They can find us with those, you know, satellite things."

"What're you talking about?"

"You know, they can see you from miles up. I saw it in a movie."

"You think the state cops do that? Are you nuts?"

This guy, I don't know why I work with him. And after what happened at the drugstore, I won't again.

He pointed out where to turn, and I did. He said the town was at the base of The Lookout. Well, I remembered passing that on the way to Liggett Falls this afternoon. It was this huge rock a couple of hundred feet

high. Which if you looked at it right looked like a man's head, like a profile, squinting. It'd been some kind of big deal to the Indians around here. Blah, blah, blah. He told me, but I didn't pay no attention. It was spooky, that weird face, and I looked once and kept on driving. I didn't like it. I'm not really superstitious, but sometimes I am.

"Winchester," he said now, meaning what the name of the town was. Five, six thousand people. We could find an empty house, stash the car in a garage, and just wait out the search. Wait till tomorrow afternoon—Sunday—when all the week-enders were driving back to Boston and New York and we'd be lost in the crowd.

I could see The Lookout up ahead, not really a shape, mostly this blackness where the stars weren't. And then the guy on the floor in the back started to moan all of a sudden and just about give me a heart attack.

"You. Shut up back there." I slapped the seat, and the guy in the back went quiet.

What a night.

We'd got to the drugstore fifteen minutes before it closed. Like you ought to do. 'Cause mosta the customers're gone and a lot've the clerks've left and people're tired, and when you push a Glock or Smitty into

their faces, they'll do just about anything you ask.

Except tonight.

We had our masks down and walked in slow, Toth getting the manager out of his little office, a fat guy started crying and that made me mad, a grown man doing that. He kept a gun on the customers and the clerks, and I was telling the cashier, this kid, to open the tills and, Jesus, he had an attitude. Like he'd seen all of those Steven Seagal movies or something. A little kiss on the cheek with the Smitty and he changed his mind and started moving. Cussing me out, but he was moving. I was counting the bucks as we were going along from one till to the next, and sure enough, we were up to about three thousand when I heard this noise and turned around and what it was, Toth was knocking a rack of chips over. I mean, Jesus. He's getting Doritos!

I look away from the kid for just a second, and what's he do? He pitches this bottle. Only not at me. Out the window. Bang, it breaks. There's no alarm I can hear, but half of them are silent anyway and I'm really pissed. I could've killed him. Right there. Only I didn't. Toth did.

He shoots the kid, blam, blam, blam. And everybody else is scattering and he turns around and shoots another one of the

clerks and a customer, just bang, not thinking or nothing. Just for no reason. Hit this girl clerk in the leg, but this guy, this customer, well, he was dead. You could see. And I'm going, What're you doing, what're you doing? And he's going, Shut up, shut up, shut up. . . . And we're like we're swearing at each other when we figured out we hadta get outa there.

So we left. Only what happens is, there's a cop outside. That's why the kid threw the bottle. And he's outa his car. So we grab another customer, this guy by the door, and we use him like a shield and get outside. And there's the cop, he's holding his gun up, looking at the customer we've got, and the cop, he's saying, It's okay, it's okay, just take it easy.

And I couldn't believe it, Toth shot him, too. I don't know whether he killed him, but there was blood so he wasn't wearing a vest it didn't look like, and I could've killed Toth there on the spot. Because why'd he do that? He didn't have to.

We threw the guy, the customer, into the back seat and tied him up with tape. I kicked out the taillights and burned rubber outa there. We made it out of Liggett Falls.

That was all just a half hour ago, but it seems like weeks.

And now we were driving

down this highway through a million pine trees. Heading right for The Lookout.

Winchester was dark.

I don't get why weekenders come to places like this. I mean, my old man took me hunting a long time ago. A couple of times, and I liked it. But coming to places like this just to look at leaves and buy furniture they call antiques but's really just busted-up crap. . . I don't know.

We found a house a block off Main Street with a bunch of newspapers in front, and I pulled into the drive and put the Buick behind it just in time. Two state police cars went shooting by. They'd been behind us not more than a half mile, without the lightbars going. Only they hadn't seen us 'causa the broke taillights, and they went by in a flash and were gone, going into town.

Toth got into the house, and he wasn't very clean about it, breaking a window in the back. It was a vacation place, pretty empty and the refrigerator shut off and the phone, too, which was a good sign—there wasn't anybody coming back soon. Also, it smelled pretty musty and had stacks of old books and magazines from the summer.

We took the guy inside, and Toth started to take the hood off

this guy's head and I said, "What the hell're you doing?"

"He hasn't said anything. Maybe he can't breathe."

This was a man talking who'd just laid a cap on three people back there, and he was worried about this guy *breathing*? Man. I just laughed. Disgusted, I mean. "Like maybe we don't want him to see us?" I said. "You think of that?" See, we weren't wearing our ski masks any more.

It's scary when you have to remind people of stuff like that. I was thinking Toth knew better. But you never know.

I went to the window and saw another squad car go past. They were going slower now. They do that. After like the first shock, after the rush, they get smart and start cruising slow, really looking for what's funny—what's *different*, you know? That's why I didn't take the papers up from the front yard. Which would've been different from how the yard looked that morning. Cops really do that Columbo stuff. I could write a book about cops.

"Why'd you do it?"

It was the guy we took.

"Why?" he whispered again.

The customer. He had a low voice, and it sounded pretty calm, I mean considering. I'll tell you, the first time I was in a shootout I was totally freaked

for a day afterwards. And I had a gun.

I looked him over. He was wearing a plaid shirt and jeans. But he wasn't a local. I could tell because of the shoes. They were rich-boy shoes, the kind you see all the yuppies wear in TV shows about Connecticut. I couldn't see his face because of the mask, but I pretty much remembered it. He wasn't young. Maybe in his forties. Kind of wrinkled skin. And he was skinny, too. Skinnier'n me, and I'm one of those people can eat what I want and I don't get fat. I don't know why. It just works that way.

"Quiet," I said. There was another car going by.

He laughed. Soft. Like he was saying, What? So they can hear me all the way outside?

Kind of laughing *at* me, you know? I didn't like that at all. And sure, I guess you *couldn't* hear anything out there, but I didn't like him giving me any crap so I said, "Just shut up. I don't want to hear your voice."

He did for a minute and just sat back in the chair where Toth put him. But then he said again, "Why'd you shoot them? You didn't have to."

"Quiet!"

"Just tell me why."

I took out my knife and snapped that sucker open, then threw it down so it stuck in a

tabletop. Sort of a *thunk* sound. "You hear that? That was a eight inch Buck knife. Carbon tempered. With a locking blade. It'd cut clean through a metal bolt. So you be quiet. Or I'll use it on you."

And he gave this laugh again. Maybe. Or it was just a snort of air. But I was thinking it was a laugh. I wanted to ask him what he meant by that, but I didn't.

"You got any money on you?" Toth asked and took the wallet out of the guy's back pocket. "Lookit," Toth said and pulled out what must've been five or six hundred. Man.

Another squad car went past, moving slow. It had a spotlight and the cop turned it on the driveway, but he just kept going. I heard a siren across town. And another one, too. It was a weird feeling, knowing those people were out there looking for us.

I took the wallet from Toth and went through it.

Randall C. Weller, Jr. He lived in Boston. A weekender. Just like I thought. He had a bunch of business cards that said he was vice-president of this big computer company. One that was in the news, trying to take over IBM or something. All of a sudden I had this thought. We could hold him for ransom. I mean, why not? Make a half million. Maybe more.



"My wife and kids'll be sick worrying," Weller said. It spooked me, hearing that. First, 'cause you don't expect somebody with a hood over his head to say anything. But mostly 'cause there I was, looking right at a picture in his wallet. And what was it of? His wife and kids.

"I ain't letting you go. Now, just shut up. I may need you."

"Like a hostage, you mean? That's only in the movies. They'll shoot you when you walk out, and they'll shoot me, too, if they have to. That's the way they do it. Just give yourself up. At least you'll save your life."

"Shut up!" I shouted.

"Let me go and I'll tell them you treated me fine. That the shooting was a mistake. It wasn't your fault."

I leaned forward and pushed the knife against his throat, not the blade 'cause that's real sharp but the blunt edge, and I told him to be quiet.

Another car went past, no light this time but it was going slower, and all of a sudden I got to thinking what if they do a door-to-door search?

"Why did he do it? Why'd he kill them?"

And funny, the way he said *he* made me feel a little better 'cause it was like he didn't blame me for it. I mean, it was Toth's fault. Not mine.

Weller kept going. "I don't get it. That man by the counter? The tall one. He was just standing there. He didn't do anything. He just shot him down."

But neither of us said nothing. Probably Toth because he didn't know why he'd shot them. And me because I didn't owe this guy any answers. I had him in my hand. Completely, and I had to let him know that. I didn't have to talk to him.

But the guy, Weller; he didn't say anything else. And I got this weird sense. Like this pressure building up. You know, because nobody was answering his damn stupid question. I felt this urge to say something. Anything. And that was the last thing I wanted to do. So I said, "I'm gonna move the car into the garage." And I went outside to do it.

I was a little spooked after the shootout. And I went through the garage pretty good. Just to make sure. But there wasn't nothing inside except tools and an old Snapper lawnmower. So I drove the Buick inside and closed the door. And went back into the house.

And then I couldn't believe what happened. I mean, Jesus

When I walked into the living room, the first thing I heard was Toth saying, "No, way,

man. I'm not snitching on Jack Prescott."

I just stood there. And you should've seen the look on his face. He knew he'd blown it big.

Now this Weller guy knew my name.

I didn't say anything. I didn't have to. Toth started talking real fast and nervous. "He said he'd pay me some big bucks to let him go." Trying to turn it around, make it Weller's fault. "I mean, I wasn't going to. I wasn't even thinking 'bout it, man. I told him forget it."

"I figured that," I said. "So? What's that got to do with tellin' him my name?"

"I don't know, man. He confused me. I wasn't thinking."

I'll say he wasn't. He hadn't been thinking all night.

I sighed to let him know I wasn't happy, but I just clapped him on the shoulder. "Okay," I said. "S'been a long night. These things happenen."

"I'm sorry, man. Really."

"Yeah. Maybe you better go spend the night in the garage or something. Or upstairs. I don't want to see you around for a while."

"Sure."

And the funny thing was, it was that Weller gave this little snicker or something. Like he knew what was coming. How'd he know that? I wondered.

Toth went to pick up a couple

of magazines and the knapsack with his gun in it and extra rounds.

Normally, killing somebody with a knife is a hard thing to do. I say normally even though I've only done it one other time. But I remember it, and it was messy and hard work. But tonight, I don't know, I was all filled up with this . . . feeling from the drugstore. Mad. I mean, really. Crazy, too, a little. And as soon as Toth turned his back, I went to work, and it wasn't three minutes later it was over. I drug his body behind the couch and then—why not—I pulled Weller's hood off. He already knew my name. He might as well see my face.

He was a dead man. We both knew it.

"You were thinking of holding me for ransom, right?"

I stood at the window and looked out. Another cop car went past, and there were more flashing lights bouncing off the low clouds and off the face of The Lookout, right over our heads. Weller had a thin face and short hair, cut real neat. He looked like every ass-kissing businessman I'd ever met. His eyes were dark and calm, and it made me even madder he wasn't shook up looking at that big bloodstain on the rug and floor.

"No," I told him.

He looked at the pile of stuff I'd taken from his wallet and kept going like I hadn't said anything. "It won't work. A kidnapping. I don't have a lot of money, and if you saw my business card and're thinking I'm an executive at the company, they have about five hundred vice-presidents. They won't pay diddly for me. And you see those kids in the picture? It was taken twelve years ago. They're both in college now."

"Where," I asked, sneering. "Harvard?"

"One's at Harvard," he said, like he was snapping at me. "And one's at Northwestern. So the house's mortgaged to the hilt. Besides, kidnapping somebody by yourself? No, you couldn't bring that off."

He saw the way I looked at him, and he said, "I don't mean you personally. I mean somebody by himself. You'd need partners."

And I figured he was right. The ransom thing was looking, I don't know, tricky.

That silence again. Nobody saying nothing and it was like the room was filling up with cold water. I walked to the window and the floors creaked under my feet, and that only made things worse. I remember one time my dad said that a house had a voice of its own, and some houses were laughing houses and

some were forlorn. Well, this was a forlorn house. Yeah, it was modern and clean and the *National Geographic*s were all in order, but it was still forlorn.

Just when I felt like shouting because of the tension Weller said, "I don't want you to kill me."

"Who said I was going to kill you?"

He gave me his funny little smile. "I've been a salesman for twenty-five years. I've sold pets and Cadillacs and typesetters, and lately I've been selling mainframe computers. I know when I'm being handed a line. You're going to kill me. It was the first thing you thought of when you heard him—" nodding toward Toth—"say your name."

I just laughed at him. "Well, that's a damn handy thing to be, sorta a walking lie detector," I said, and I was being sarcastic.

But he just said, "Damn handy," like he was agreeing with me.

"I don't want to kill you."

"Oh, I know you don't *want* to. You didn't want your friend to kill anybody back there at the drugstore either. I could see that. But people *got* killed, and that ups the stakes. Right?"

And those eyes of his, they just dug into me, and I couldn't say anything.

"But," he said, "I'm going to talk you out of it."

He sounded real certain, and that made me feel better. 'Cause I'd rather kill a cocky son of a bitch than a pathetic one. And so I laughed. "Talk me out of it?"

"I'm going to try."

"Yeah? How you gonna do that?"

Weller cleared his throat a little. "First, let's get everything on the table. I've seen your face, and I know your name. Jack Prescott. Right? You're, what?, about five nine, a hundred fifty pounds, black hair. So you've got to assume I can identify you. I'm not going to play any games and say I didn't see you clearly or hear who you were. Or anything like that. We all squared away on that, Jack?"

I nodded, rolling my eyes like this was all a load of crap. But I gotta admit I was kinda curious what he had to say.

"My promise," he said, "is that I won't turn you in. Not under any circumstances. The police'll never learn your name from me. Or your description. I'll never testify against you."

Sounding honest as a priest. Real slick delivery. Well, he was a salesman, and I wasn't going to buy it. But he didn't know I was onto him. Let him give me his pitch, let him think I was going along. When it came down to it, after we'd got away and were

somewhere in the woods upstate, I'd want him relaxed. Thinking he was going to get away. No screaming, no hassles. Just two fast cuts and that'd be it.

"You understand what I'm saying?"

I tried to look serious and said, "Sure. You're thinking you can talk me out of killing you. Which I'm not inclined to do anyway. Kill you, I mean."

And there was that weird little smile again.

I said, "You think you can talk me out of it. You've got reasons?"

"Oh, I've got reasons, you bet. One in particular. One that you can't argue with."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"I'll get to it in a minute. Let me tell you some of the practical reasons you should let me go. First, you think you've got to kill me because I know who you are, right? Well, how long you think your identity's going to be a secret? Your buddy shot a cop back there. I don't know police stuff except what I see in the movies. But they're going to be looking at tire tracks and witnesses who saw plates and makes of cars and gas stations you might've stopped at on the way here."

He was just blowing smoke. The Buick was stolen. I mean, I'm not stupid.

But he went on, looking at me real coy, "Even if your car was stolen, they're going to check down every lead. Every shoe-print around where you or your friend found it, talk to everybody in the area around the time it vanished."

I kept smiling like it was nuts what he was saying. But this was true, shooting the cop part. You do that and you're in big trouble. Trouble that sticks with you. They don't stop looking till they find you.

"And when they identify your buddy," he nodded toward the couch where Toth's body was lying. "They're going to make some connection to you."

"I don't know him that good. We just hung around together the past few months."

Weller jumped on this. "Where? A bar? A restaurant? Anybody ever see you in public?"

I got mad, and I shouted, "So? What're you saying? They gonna bust me anyway, then I'll just take you out with me. How's that for an argument?"

Calm as could be he said, "I'm simply telling you that one of the reasons you want to kill me doesn't make sense. And think about this—the shooting at the drugstore? It wasn't premeditated. It was, what do they call it? Heat of passion. But you kill me, that'll be first degree. You'll get

the death penalty when they find you."

When they find you. Right. I laughed to myself. Oh, what he said made sense, but the fact is, killing isn't a making-sense kind of thing. Hell, it *never* makes sense, but sometimes you just have to do it. But I was kind of having fun now. I wanted to argue back. "Yeah, well, I killed Toth. That wasn't heat of passion. I'm going to get the needle anyway for that."

"But nobody gives a damn about him," he came right back. "They don't care if he killed *himself* or got hit by a car accidentally. You can take that piece of garbage out of the equation altogether. They care if you kill *me*. I'm the 'Innocent Bystander' in the headlines. I'm the 'Father of Two.' You kill me, you're as good as dead."

I started to say something, but he kept going.

"Now, here's another reason I'm not going to say anything about you. Because you know my name, and you know where I live. You know I have a family, and you know how important they are to me. If I turn you in, you could come after us. I'd never jeopardize my family that way. Now let me ask you something. What's the worst thing that could happen to you?"

"Keep listening to you spout on and on."

Weller laughed hard at that. I could see he was surprised I had a sense of humor. After a minute he said, "Seriously. The worst thing."

"I don't know. I never thought about it."

"Lose a leg? Go deaf? Lose all your money? Go blind . . . Héy, that looked like it hit a nerve. Going blind?"

"Yeah, I guess. That'd be the worst thing I could think of."

That *was* a pretty damn scary thing, and I'd thought on it before. 'Cause that was what happened to my old man. And it wasn't not seeing any more that got to me. No, it was that I'd have to depend on somebody else for, Christ, for everything, I guess.

"Okay, think about this," he said. "The way you feel about going blind's the way my family'd feel if they lost me. It'd be that bad for them. You don't want to cause them that kind of pain, do you?"

I didn't want to, no. But I knew I *had* to. I didn't want to think about it any more. I asked him, "So what's this last reason you're telling me about?"

"The last reason," he said, kind of whispering. But he didn't go on. He looked around the room, you know, like his mind was wandering.

"Yeah?" I asked. I was pretty curious. "Tell me."

But he just asked, "You think these people, they have a bar?"

And I'd just been thinking I could use a drink, too. I went into the kitchen, and of course they didn't have any beer in the fridge on account of the house being all closed up and the power off. But they did have scotch, and that'd be my first choice anyway.

I got a couple of glasses and took the bottle back to the living room. Thinking this was a good idea. When it came time to do it, it'd be easier for him and for me both if we were kinda tanked. I shoved my Smitty into his neck and cut the tape his hands were tied with, then taped them in front of him. I sat back and kept my knife near, ready to go, in case he tried something. But it didn't look like he was going to be a hero or anything. He read over the scotch bottle, kind of disappointed it was cheap. And I agreed with him there. One thing I learned a long time ago, you going to rob, rob rich.

I sat back where I could keep an eye on him.

"The last reason. Okay, I'll tell you. I'm going to *prove* to you that you should let me go."

"You are?"

"All those other reasons—the practical ones, the humanitarian ones . . . I'll concede you don't care much about those—you don't look very convinced. All

right? Then let's look at the one reason you should let me go."

I figured this was going to be more crap. But what he said was something I never would've expected, and it made me laugh.

"For your own sake."

"For me? What're you talking about?"

"See, Jack, I don't think you're lost."

"Whatta you mean, lost?"

"I don't think your soul's beyond redemption."

I laughed at this, laughed out loud, because I just had to. I expected a hell of a lot better from a hotshot vice-president salesman like him. "Soul? You think I got a soul?"

"Well, everybody has a soul," he said, and what was crazy was, he said it like he was surprised that I didn't think so. It was like I'd said wait a minute you mean the earth ain't flat or something.

"Well, if I got a soul it's taken the fast lane to hell." Which was this line I heard in this movie and I tried to laugh, but it sounded flat. Like Weller was saying something deep and I was just kidding around. It made me feel cheap. I stopped smiling and looked down at Toth, lying there in the corner, those dead eyes of his just staring, staring, and I wanted to stab him again I was so mad.

"We're talking about your soul."

I snickered and sipped the liquor. "Oh yeah, I'll bet you you're the sort that reads those angel books they got all over the place now."

"I go to church, but no, I'm not talking about all that silly stuff. I don't mean magic. I mean your conscience. What Jack Prescott's all about."

I could tell him about social workers and youth counselors and all those guys who don't know nothing about the way life works. They think they do. But it's the words they use. You can tell they don't know a thing. Some counselors or somebody'll talk to me and they say, Oh, you're maladjusted, you're denying your anger, things like that. When I hear that, I know they don't know nothing about souls or spirits.

"Not the afterlife," Weller was going on. "Not mortality. I'm talking about life here on earth that's important. Oh sure, you look skeptical. But listen to me. I really believe if you have a connection with somebody, if you trust them, if you have faith in them, then there's hope for you."

"Hope? What does that mean? Hope for what?"

"That you'll become a real human being. Lead a real life."

Real . . . I didn't know what



he meant, but he said it like what he was saying was so clear that I'd have to be an idiot to miss it. So I didn't say nothing.

He kept going. "Oh, there're reasons to steal, and there're reasons to kill. But on the whole, don't you really think it's better not to? Just think about it: Why do we put people in jail if it's all right for them to murder? Not just us but all societies."

"So, what? I'm gonna give up my evil ways?" I laughed at him.

And he just lifted his eyebrow and said, "Maybe. Tell me, Jack, how'd you feel when your buddy—what's his name?"

"Joe Roy Toth."

"Toth, when he shot that guy by the counter? How'd you feel?"

"I don't know."

"He just turned around and shot him. For no reason. You knew that wasn't right, didn't you?" And I started to say something. But he said, "No, don't answer me. You'd be inclined to lie. And that's all right. It's an instinct in your line of work. But I don't want you *believing* any lies you tell me. Okay? I want you to look into your heart and tell me if you didn't think something was real wrong about what Toth did. Think about that, Jack. You knew something wasn't right."

All right, I did. But who wouldn't? Toth screwed every-

thing up. Everything went sour. And it was all his fault.

"It dug at you, right, Jack? You wished he hadn't done it."

I didn't say nothing but just drank some more scotch and looked out the window and watched the flashing lights around the town. Sometimes they seemed close, and sometimes they seemed far away.

"If I let you go, you'll tell 'em."

Like everybody else. They all betrayed me. My father—even after he went blind, the son of a bitch turned me in. My first P.O., the judges. Sandra. . . . My boss, the one I knifed.

"No, I won't," Weller said. "We're talking about an agreement. I don't break deals. I promised I won't tell a soul about you, Jack. Not even my wife." He leaned forward, cupping the booze between his hands. "You let me go, it'll mean all the difference in the world to you. It'll mean that you're not hopeless. I guarantee your life'll be different. That one act—letting me go—it'll change you forever. Oh, maybe not this year. Or for five years. But you'll come around. You'll give up all this, everything that happened back there in Liggett Falls. All the crime, the killing. You'll come around. I know you will."

"You just expect me to believe you won't tell anybody?"

"Ah," Weller said and lifted

his taped-up hands to drink more scotch. "Now we get down to the big issue."

Again that silence, and finally I said, "And what's that?"

"Faith."

There was this burst of siren outside, and I told him to shut up and pushed the gun against his head. His hands were shaking, but he didn't do anything stupid and a few minutes later, after I sat back, he started talking again. "Faith. That's what I'm talking about. A man who has faith is somebody who can be saved."

"Well, I don't have any god-damn faith," I told him.

But he kept right on talking. "If you believe in another human being, you have faith."

"Why the hell do you care whether I'm saved or not?"

"Because life's hard, and people're cruel. I told you I'm a churchgoer. A lot of the Bible's crazy. But some of it I believe. And one of the things I believe is that sometimes we're put in these situations to make a difference. I think that's what happened tonight. That's why you and I both happened to be at the drugstore at the same time. You've felt that, haven't you? Like an omen? Like something happens and is telling you you ought do this or shouldn't do that."

Which was weird 'cause the

whole time we were driving up to Liggett Falls I kept thinking, something funny's going on. I don't know what it is, but this job's gonna be different.

"What if," he said, "everything tonight happened for a purpose? My wife had a cold, so I went to buy NyQuil. I went to that drugstore instead of 7-Eleven to save a buck or two. You happened to hit that store at just that time. You happened to have your buddy—" he nodded toward Toth's body "—with you. The cop car just happened by at that particular moment. And the clerk behind the counter just happened to see him. That's a lot of coincidences. Don't you think?"

And then—this sent a damn chill right down my spine—he said, "Here we are in the shadow of that big rock, that face."

Which is one hundred percent what I was thinking. Exactly the same—about The Lookout, I mean. I don't know why I was. But I happened to be looking out the window and thinking about it at that exact same instant. I tossed back the scotch and had another and, oh man, I was pretty freaked out.

"Like he's looking at us, waiting for you to make a decision. Oh, don't think it was just you, though. Maybe the purpose was to affect everybody's life there. That customer at the counter

Toth shot. Maybe it was just his time to go—fast, you know, before he got cancer or had a stroke. Maybe that girl, the clerk, had to get shot in the leg so she'd get her life together, maybe get off drugs or give up drinking."

"And you? What about you?"

"Well, I'll tell you about me. Maybe you're the good deed in my life. I've spent years thinking only about making money. Take a look at my wallet. There. In the back."

I pulled it open. There were a half-dozen of these little cards, like certificates. RANDALL WELLER—SALESMAN OF THE YEAR. EXCEEDED TARGET TWO YEARS STRAIGHT. BEST SALESMAN OF 1992.

Weller kept going. "There are plenty of others back in my office. And trophies, too. And in order for me to win those, I've had to neglect people. My family and friends. People who could maybe use my help. And that's not right. Maybe you kidnapping me, it's one of those signs to make me turn my life around."

The funny thing was this made sense. Oh, it was hard to imagine not doing heists. And I couldn't see myself, if it came down to a fight, not going for my Buck or my Smitty to take the other guy out. That turning the other cheek stuff, that's only for cowards. But maybe I *could* see

a day when my life'd be just straight time. Living with some woman, maybe a wife, living in a house. Doing what my father and mother, whatever she was like, never did.

"If I was to let you go," I said, "you'd have to tell 'em something."

He shrugged. "I'll say you locked me in the trunk and then tossed me out somewhere near here. I wandered around, looking for a house or something, and got lost. It could take me a day to find somebody. That's believable."

"Or you could flag down a car in an hour."

"I could. But I won't."

"You keep saying that. But how do I *know*?"

"That's the faith part. You don't know. No guarantees."

"Well, I guess I don't have any faith."

"Then *I'm* dead. And *your* life's never gonna change. End of story." He sat back, and it was crazy but he looked calm, smiling a little.

That silence again but it was like it was really this roar all around us, and it kept going till the whole room was filled up with the sound of a siren.

"You just want . . . what do you want?"

He drank more scotch. "Here's a proposal. Let me walk outside."

"Oh, right. Just let you stroll out for some fresh air or something?"

"Let me walk outside and I promise you I'll walk right back again."

"Like a test?"

He thought about this for a second. "Yeah. A test."

"Where's this faith you're talking about? You walk outside, you try to run and I'd shoot you in the back."

"No, what you do is you put the gun someplace in the house. The kitchen or someplace. Somewhere you couldn't get it if I ran. You stand at the window, where we can see each other. And I'll tell you up front. I can run like the wind. I was lettered track and field in college, and I still jog every day of the year."

"You know if you run and bring the cops back everything's gonna get bloody. I'll kill the first five troopers come through that door. Nothing'll stop me, and that blood'll be on your hands."

"Of course I know that," he said. "But if this's going to work, you can't think that way. You've got to assume the worst is going to happen. That if I run I'll tell the cops everything. Where you are and that there're no hostages here and that you've only got one or two guns. And they're going to come in and blow you to hell. And you're not going to

take a single one down with you. You're going to die and die painfully 'cause of a few lousy hundred bucks. . . . But, but; but . . ." He held up his hand and stopped me from saying anything. "You gotta understand, faith means risk."

"That's stupid."

"I think it's just the opposite. It'd be the smartest thing you ever did in your life."

"What'll it prove?" I asked. But I was just stalling. And he knew it. He said patiently, "That I'm a man of my word. That you can trust me."

"And what do I get out of it?"

And then this son of a bitch smiled that weird little smile of his. "I think you'll be surprised."

I tossed back another scotch and had to think about this.

Weller said, "I can see it there already. Some of that faith. It's there. Not a lot. But some."

And yeah, maybe there was a little. 'Cause I was thinking about how mad I got at Toth and the way he ruined everything. I didn't want anybody to get killed tonight. I *was* sick of it. Sick of the way my life had gone. Sometimes it was good, being alone and all. Not answering to anybody. But sometimes it was real bad. And this guy, Weller, it was like he was showing me something different.

"So," I said. "You just want me to put the gun down?"

He looked around. "Put it in the kitchen. You stand in the doorway or window. All I'm gonna do is walk down to the street and walk back."

I looked out the window. It was maybe fifty feet down the driveway. There were these bushes on either side of it. He could just take off, and I'd never find him.

All through the sky I could see lights flickering.

"Naw, I ain't gonna. You're nuts."

And I expected begging or something. Or getting pissed off, more likely—which is what happens to me when people don't do what I tell them. Or don't do it fast enough. But, naw, he just nodded. "Okay, Jack. You thought about it. That's a good thing. You're not ready yet. I respect that." He sipped a little more scotch, looking at the glass. And that was the end of it.

Then all of a sudden these searchlights started up. They was some ways away, but I still got spooked and backed away from the window. Pulled my gun out. Only then I saw that it wasn't nothing to do with the robbery. It was just a couple of big spotlights shining on The Look-out. They must've gone on every night, this time.

I looked up at it. From here it

didn't look like a face at all. It was just a rock. Gray and brown and these funny pine trees growing sideways out of cracks.

Watching it for a minute or two. Looking out over the town, and something that guy was saying went into my head. Not the words, really. Just the *thought*. And I was thinking about everybody in that town. Leading normal lives. There was a church steeple and the roofs of small houses. A lot of little yellow lights in town. You could just make out the hills in the distance. And I wished for a minute I was in one of them houses. Sitting there. Watching TV with a wife next to me. Like Sandy or somebody.

I turned back from the window, and I said, "You'd just walk down to the road and back? That's it?"

"That's all. I won't run off, you don't go get your gun. We trust each other. What could be simpler?"

Listening to the wind. Not strong but a steady hiss that was comforting in a funny way even though any other time I'da thought it sounded cold and raw. It was like I heard a voice. I don't know from where. Something in me said I ought to do this.

I didn't say nothing else 'cause I was right on the edge and I was afraid he'd say something

that'd make me change my mind. I just took the Smith & Wesson and looked at it for a minute, then put it on the kitchen table. I came back with the Buck and cut his feet free. Then I figured if I was going to do it I ought go all the way. So I cut his hands free, too. Weller seemed surprised I did that. But he smiled like he knew I was playing the game. I pulled him to his feet and held the blade to his neck and took him to the door.

"You're doing a good thing," he said.

I was thinking, oh man, I can't believe this. It's crazy.

I opened the door and smelled cold fall air and woodsmoke and pine, and I heard the wind in the rocks and trees above our heads.

"Go on," I told him.

Weller didn't look back to check up on me. . . . Faith, I guess. He kept walking real slow down toward the road.

I felt funny, I'll tell you, and a couple of times when he went past some real shadowy places in the driveway and could disappear I was like, oh man, this is all messed up. I'm crazy.

I almost panicked a few times and bolted for the Smitty but I didn't. When Weller got down near the sidewalk, I was actually holding my breath. I expected him to go, I really did. I was

looking for that moment—when people tense up, when they're gonna swing or draw down on you or bolt. It's like their bodies're shouting what they're going to be doing before they do it. Only Weller wasn't doing none of that. He walked down to the sidewalk real casual. And he turned and looked up at the face of The Lookout, like he was just another weekender. Then he turned around. He nodded at me. Which is when the car came by. It was a state trooper. Those're the dark cars, and he didn't have the lightbar going. So he was almost on us before I knew it. I guess I was looking at Weller so hard I didn't see nothing else.

There it was, two doors away, and Weller saw it the same time I did.

And I thought, that's it. Oh, hell.

But when I was turning to get the gun, I saw this like flash of motion down by the road. And I stopped cold.

Could you believe it? Weller'd dropped onto the ground and rolled underneath a tree. I closed the door real fast and watched from the window. The trooper stopped and turned his light on the driveway. The beam—it was real bright—it moved up and down and hit all the bushes and the front of the house, then back to the road.

But it was like Weller was digging down into the pine needles to keep from being seen. I mean, he was *hiding* from those sons of bitches. Doing whatever he could to stay out of the way of the light.

Then the car moved on, and I saw the lights checking out the house next door and then it was gone. I kept my eyes on Weller the whole time, and he didn't do nothing stupid. I seen him climb out from under the trees and dust himself off. Then he came walking back to the house. Easy, like he was walking to a bar to meet some buddies.

He came inside and shook his head. Gave this little sigh, like relief. And laughed. Then he held his hands out. I didn't even ask him to.

I taped 'em up again with adhesive tape, and he sat down in the chair, picked up his scotch, and sipped it.

And damn, I'll tell you something. The God's truth. I felt good. Naw, naw, it wasn't like I'd seen the light or anything like that. But I was thinking that of all the people in my life—my dad or Sandy or Toth or anybody else—I never did really trust them. I'd never let myself go all the way. And here, tonight, I did. With a stranger and somebody who had the power to do me some harm. It was a pret-

ty scary feeling, but it was also a good feeling.

It was a little thing, real little. But maybe that's where stuff like this starts. I realized then that I'd been wrong. I could let him go. Oh, I'd keep him tied up here. Gagged. It'd be a day or so before he'd get out. But he'd agree to that. I knew he would. And I'd write his name and address down, let him know I knew where him and his family lived. But that was only part of why I was thinking I'd let him go. I wasn't sure what the rest of it was. But it was something about what'd just happened, something between me and him.

"How you feel?" he asked.

I wasn't going to give too much away. No, sir. But I couldn't help saying, "I thought I was gone then. But you did right by me."

"And you did right, too, Jack." And then he said, "Pour us another round."

I filled the glasses to the top. We tapped 'em.

"Here's to you, Jack. And to faith."

"To faith."

I tossed back the whisky, and when I lowered my head, sniffing air through my nose to clear my head, well, that was when he got me. Right in the face.

He was good, that son of a bitch. Tossed the glass low so



that even when I ducked, automatically, the booze caught me in the eyes, and man, that stung like nobody's business. I couldn't believe it. I was howling in pain and going for the knife. But it was too late. He had it all planned out, exactly what I was going to do. How I was gonna move. He brought his knee up into my chin and knocked a couple of teeth out, and I went over onto my back before I could get the knife outa my pocket. Then he dropped down on my belly with his knee—I remembered I'd never bothered to tape his feet up again—and he knocked the wind out, and there I was lying, like I was paralyzed, trying to breathe and all. Only I couldn't. And the pain was incredible, but what was worse was the feeling that he didn't trust me.

I was whispering, "No, no, no. I was going to, man. You don't understand. I was going to let you go."

I couldn't see nothing and couldn't really hear nothing either, my ears were roaring so much. I was gasping, "You don't understand you don't understand."

Man, the pain was so bad. So bad . . .

Weller must've got the tape off his hands, chewed through it, I guess, 'cause he was rolling me over. I felt him tape my hands

together, then grab me and drag me over to a chair, tape my feet to the legs. He got some water and threw it in my face to wash the whisky out of my eyes.

He sat down in a chair in front of me. And he just stared at me for a long time while I caught my breath. He picked up his glass, poured more scotch. I shied away, thinking he was going to throw it in my face again, but he just sat there, sipping it and staring at me.

"You . . . I was going to let you go. I was."

"I know," he said. Still calm.

"You know?"

"I could see it in your face. I've been a salesman for twenty years, remember? I know when I've closed a deal."

I'm a pretty strong guy, 'specially when I'm mad, and I tried real hard to break through that tape but there was no doing it. "Goddamn you!" I shouted. "You said you weren't going to turn me in. You, all your goddamn talk about faith. . . ."

"Shhhh," Weller whispered. And he sat back, crossed his legs. Easy as could be. Looking me up and down. "That fellow your friend shot back at the drugstore. The customer at the counter?"

I nodded slowly.

"He was my friend. It's his place my wife and I're staying

at this weekend. With all our kids."

I just stared at him. His friend? What was he saying?

"I didn't know—"

"Be quiet," he said, real soft. "I've known him for years. Gerry was one of my best friends."

"I didn't want nobody to die. I—"

"But somebody did die. And it was your fault."

"Toth . . ."

He whispered, "It was your fault."

"All right, you tricked me. Call the cops. Get it over with, you goddamn liar."

"You really don't understand, do you?" He shook his head. Why was he so calm? His hands weren't shaking. He wasn't looking around, nervous and all. Nothing like that. He said, "If I'd wanted to turn you in, I would just've flagged down that squad car a few minutes ago. But I said I wouldn't do that. And I won't. I gave you my word

I wouldn't tell the cops a thing about you. And I won't."

"Then what do you want?" I shouted. "Tell me." Trying to bust through that tape. And as he unfolded my Buck knife with a click, I was thinking of something I told him.

Oh man, no . . . Oh, no.

*"Yeah, being blind, I guess. That'd be the worst thing I could think of."*

"What're you going to do?"

"What'm I going to do, Jack?"

Weller said. He cut the last bit of tape off his wrists with the Buck, then looked up at me. "Well, I'll tell you. I spent a good bit of time tonight proving to you that you shouldn't kill me. And now . . ."

"What, man? What?"

"Now I'm going to spend a good bit of time proving to you that you should've."

Then, real slow, Weller finished his scotch and stood up. And he walked toward me, that weird little smile on his face.

FICTION

# Heart Attack

Jack Leavitt

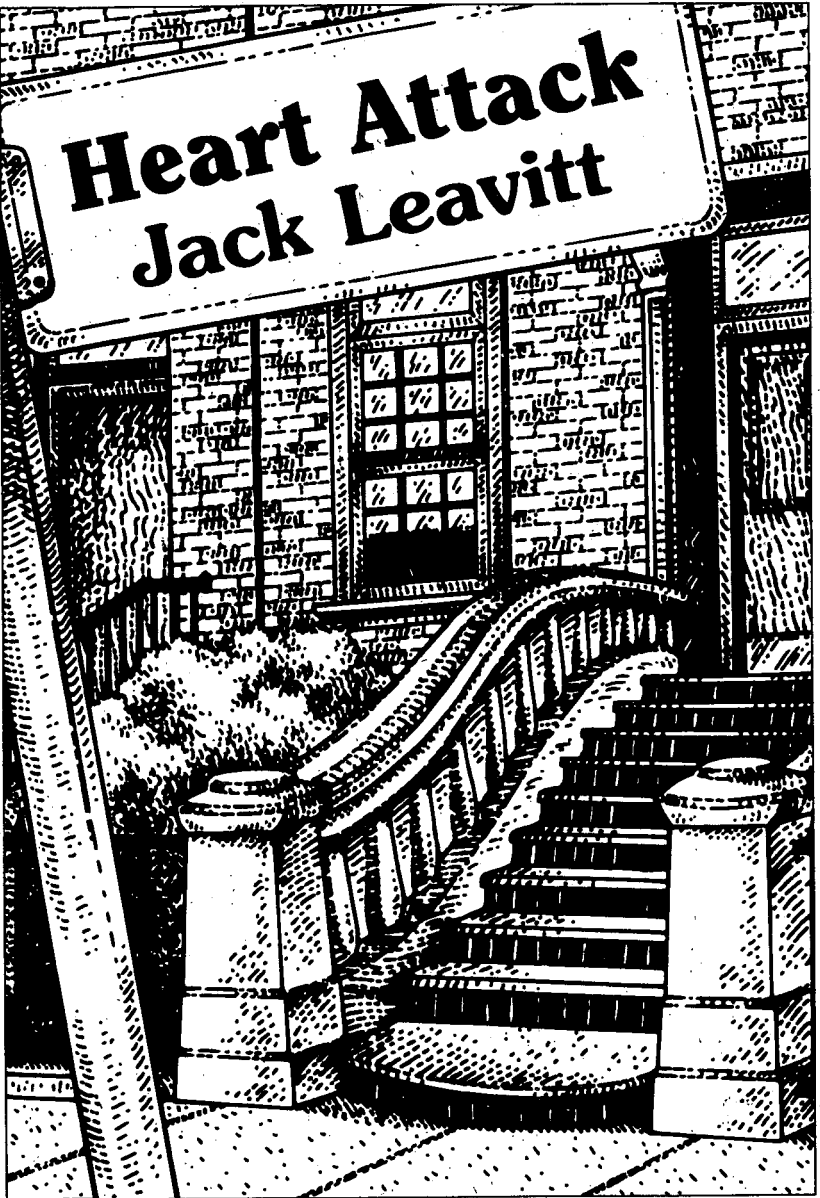


Illustration by David Simon

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**A**be Rose smiled at me. Sadly. "Of course I knew your grandfather before he died. We grew up together, your *zayde* and I."

"In Brooklyn."

Mr. Rose—*Abe*—shrugged. "Even in those days Brooklyn was too big. Two, three million people. We grew up in Brownsville."

"A Brooklyn neighborhood."

"A Brooklyn slum."

We were facing each other in his sister's living room, a spacious area dominated by a wall-sized picture window that overlooked the managed greenery of a regional park. The Northern California afternoon sparkled with bright sunlight and luminous clouds. I sat on a blue-striped couch with my tape recorder and notepad on the coffee table next to me. Abe sat across the room in a burgundy easy chair, his head tilted back against the middle shelf of a bookcase filled with monthly bookclub selections, knickknacks, and a large radio. Only a moment earlier he had turned off the baseball game to give me his full attention.

“I still follow the pennant races,” he explained. “Not the way I used to. Without money on anybody I listen while I do other things. Don’t even ask me what the score is.”

Short, plump, and bald, Abe

appeared far more relaxed than I did. What I wanted was information that, by right, belonged to me; what I sensed was that he would entertain himself before deciding whether to say anything worth hearing. By temperament, by background, by cunning, he should be the most suspicious of men. But at his age, two generations and a continent away from his old neighborhood, how could the truth hurt him?

“I hope you understand my concern,” I said, uncertain how he viewed me. I wanted to sound sincere because I *was* sincere. Even so, sincerity too often sounds like arrogance, radiating contempt for people dedicated to less significant causes. “Finding out about my family means a lot to me.”

"When you're old and you need a place to stay, after being away for a long, long time, a family looks pretty good." Abe gestured at the comfortable room. "No rent, unless you count having to listen to my sister's *kvetching*. You'd think nobody else ever became a widow."

"My grandmother did. She was a young widow."

"A pregnant young widow. When your grandfather died, nobody knew her condition. Herself included. Otherwise life might have been different. I don't know. I still think things

worked out for the best. She's alive. I'm alive. You want more? Buy a saxophone."

"How can anyone prevent a heart attack? From the few stories people are willing to talk about, nobody took care of himself better than my grandfather did. Everybody was shocked when you found him in the bathtub."

"Shocked, maybe. Sad, no. You'll forgive me, but your grandfather—he has a name, you know. Irving Weinstein. That's how your family decided to become Winston, the same way Abraham Rosenthal became Abe Rose. We signed papers at Borough Hall, making our names wonderful so people who didn't know us would think we were real Americans. Pilgrims, even.—Irving had enemies. And I'll tell you, he deserved them."

I hesitated. Abe noticed my discomfort. Did I really expect an honest report about a man who died nearly sixty years ago? Yes, I did. Yes, I did! Why else would I travel three thousand miles to track down my heritage? Whatever was missing from my life would take shape from the people who spawned me. Grandfather begat Father, Father begat me, and I begat emptiness. No wife, no child, no sisters, no brothers, no uncles, no aunts. Only a bitter grand-

mother, a helpless father, a guilt-rendering mother. I envied people who could trace proud bloodlines through firm names and cemeteries.

Waving at my tape recorder, Abe enunciated his words clearly and emphatically. "You want to know was I his enemy? Sure I was." He raised both hands in a gesture of surrender. "But your grandmother. Ruthie. I loved her. We all did. So you get credit for her and no blame for him. I'm talking to you, right?, even with that machine on."

"And I appreciate it, believe me. Finding you was hard to do. Took a long time." Until I learned that Abe's sister and a schoolteacher I met at a restaurant were related by marriage, Abe had been a name, a Brownsville character, with "not known, at this address" his official testimonial. The years he spent in prison had clouded his trail.

"Who's left to remember me? For most people, fifty, sixty is when their friends start dying. Not for my bunch. Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one. That's when we started. First, in the neighborhood, where we did a hard business. Tough times, mean times. Then the war made dying something everybody lived with. What're you? Twenty-four? Twenty-five? You know who Hitler was?"



"Of course I do!" I must have looked indignant.

"Okay, Mr. Expert, if you're so smart, tell me about when I was growing up. The Bonus Marchers. The W.P.A. Danzig. Ethiopia. The Polish Corridor." He wagged a finger at me. "The Panay. The *Squalus*. Louis—Lepke—Buchalter." I shook my head. He nodded. "That's what I thought. For knowing a little bit you shouldn't be too proud. You want something from me, you show respect."

I clenched my teeth. Repressing my feelings made me look angrier than I felt. "How can you expect me to remember the 1930's? When I was born, Germany and Japan were our best friends. I'd take pictures of our Volkswagen with my father's Nikon. Even my father was a baby when the war started. He never knew Irving, never saw his own father. Not once. I'm trying to get some continuity in my life. I'm not trying to show off."

"Your family's well? For your father I used to buy ice cream cones. Your mother, maybe I knew her, maybe not. Too many kids in those days. Most of them stayed away from me."

"Everybody's just what you can expect. Complaining as much as ever."

"The parents used to warn the kids, 'Watch out for Abe. He

works for Lepke. You get him mad at you, he puts an icepick in your heart.' They still make movies about the guys. Murder, Inc., that's what they called us." He chuckled. "Except in the movies they're less Jewish than we were. And not so good-looking." He brushed back a fringe of hair and winked at me.

From another room, undoubtedly the kitchen, came a clanging sound, a lid banging against a pot. I heard a woman humming.

"My sister Nettie. She's back from the store. Now we can have tea. Or coffee. Coffee's fine with me. When I had to drink what they gave me, I learned to like it."

"Either one. Did Nettie know my grandparents?"

Abe frowned for a moment, trying to drag relationships from the ceiling. "They went to the same junior high school. J.H.S. 109. On Powell Street, off Livonia, near the I.R.T. tracks, a block or two either way. What does it matter? Not well is what I think. Nettie was younger than your grandparents."

"My grandmother Ruth never talks about her days in Brooklyn. She acts as though there's something to be ashamed of." Our voices carried farther than I thought.

Nettie called out from the kitchen. "Being poor is always

something to be ashamed of. I remember Irving and Ruthie. He was gorgeous. She was all right."

Abe twisted his mouth in an exaggerated show of contempt. He whispered, "*She was all right!*" Listen, all this time goes by and the girls are still jealous of Ruthie. The boys would've done anything for her." To himself he added, "Some of us did."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"Aah." Abe sat up, stroked his chin, and looked out the window. "A lot of years. Before my own troubles caught up with me. I never shoved my problems into her life. How can you tell something's gonna be for the last time?"

The red light on my tape recorder remained steady, a sign of uninterrupted recording. No matter how awkward the prospect, I wanted an accurate account of this conversation. Nobody at home was going to tell me, "You misunderstood Abe Rose, that's what happened. How your grandfather died was never a mystery to anybody. He looked healthy, but inside he was sick."

I leaned forward, speaking reluctantly. "Abe, people change. Clearly you see my grandmother's good side." He looked suspicious, ready to deny the affection he had described a moment

ago. "I don't. To me, she's a nasty, selfish, disruptive person. She ruined my father's life, turned him into a whining drunkard. No prospects, no backbone." Abe's eyes slitted half closed. He drummed on the chair's armrest. "I realize, Abe, that I'm upsetting you. But I ask you, please, try to figure out why. Give me some regard, the same way I show you respect by telling the truth." His eyes flashed hostility. "I'm afraid of what I'm becoming. I'm grown up, but I'm frightened. I don't want to be like my father and my grandmother. That's why I have to find out where the misery started."

Once again Nettie's voice interrupted our conversation. "Misery always starts when you're hungry. Do you take milk in your coffee? Sugar? Tell me before I come in and have to make a second trip."

"I'm fine," I shouted. "On the phone, you were kind to invite me. But please don't go to any trouble. Thanks anyway."

"Hey!" Abe clapped his hands. He raised his voice to let Nettie appreciate his loyalty. "Me, you can insult—but Nettie, never. She says, 'Coffee,' you drink coffee. She says, 'Cake,' you eat cake. . . ."

"Pound cake, made with real butter," the distant sister joined in, almost cheerfully.



“She says, ‘Now,’ you say, ‘For these blessings, oh Lord, I give my thanks.’ Because tomorrow we could all be dead from starvation or, *zelt gornisht helfen*, even something worse.”

“I just didn’t want to bother you,” I apologized. “I’d love coffee and cake.”

Abe switched his attention to the pine grove outside the window. From the peaceful trees he drew a bittersweet memory. “My father beat me up once for eating pound cake. We’d just finished lunch, thick roastbeef sandwiches, with lettuce and tomato, I remember, and mustard—and I took a chunk of pound cake from the icebox. On my second bite he walked back into the kitchen. *Whack! Pas-cudnyak!*” First he hit me, then he cursed me. “What kind of bum are you?” Abe scowled at the trees.

“He was saving the cake for himself?”

Abe’s sad smile returned. “You really don’t get it, do you, my fine American *mensch*? If you can’t even understand what kosher food means, how can you appreciate what happened to your grandfather?”

“I didn’t know there was a connection.” On my pad I scribbled, “Pound cake?????”

“*Milchedikah* and *fleshedikah*. Dairy products and meat products. If you’re a real Jew, you

can’t eat pound cake, with all that butter, right after you’ve eaten meat.”

As Nettie walked into the room carrying a tray with two coffee cups and a serving plate of moist, dark-crusted pound cake, she greeted me. “Don’t mind Abe. Kosher rules are funny today, but when they wrote the Bible, the food laws made sense.” Unlike Abe she was tall and thin, with thick gray hair. Hospitality came easily to her. “Make yourself at home and don’t starve.” As soon as she placed the tray on the coffee table, she wiped her hands on her apron and went back to the kitchen.

I tasted the cake. “Very good.” When I gestured at the plate, Abe shook his head.

“Later. Let the coffee cool down first. The thing that made Brownsville a real neighborhood, a community, is that all the old folks—I was young then—were immigrants. From Russia mostly, some from Poland. *Litvaks*. Eastern Europe. Speaking Yiddish all the time. They ran away from the Cossacks to tenements built rotten from the first brick. With  *pogroms* in the old country and sweatshop jobs here, they had to put up with each other. Everybody else was the enemy. Eating kosher food meant you belonged, you knew the password to God.”

Give me broiled lobster drenched in *goyishe* butter, and you can keep Heaven for the orthodox."

"You think I'm gonna quarrel with you about menus? I've got better things to do. Being Jewish and safe in America also meant you had obligations." Reaching for his cup, Abe sipped at the coffee, swallowed slowly, and rested the cup on the arm of his chair. "By the time the middle 1930's came around, when the German Jews finally decided to escape from the Nazis, they had a terrible time. The American immigration laws got tightened from the way it was before. In a depression the government didn't need people who talked funny and ate funny. They sent the boats back with the people still inside. You look like I'm crazy."

"No, Abe, no," I tried to swallow a bite of cake as I protested. Crumbs fell on my shirt. When I brushed them off, they fell onto the couch. I brushed them into the palm of my hand and put them in a small, neat pile next to the serving plate. Nettie had forgotten napkins. "My expression changes every time I get another thought."

"So what were you thinking?"

"That I still don't know what happened to my grandfather."

"He almost wasn't your grandfather. Did you know that?"

"I don't know anything."

"You knew enough to find me."

"Why not? Is there a better way to get Nettie's pound cake? She's not the A&P. She doesn't advertise."

Abe laughed. "A smart one. Good for you." He drank his coffee steadily, probably more to keep me in suspense than to ease his thirst. "Remember, from a little while ago, Nettie told you Irving was gorgeous. It's true. He was the best-looking man I ever knew—and I'm not interested in men. Ruthie herself was a beauty. Living in the same block, naturally they got together. Perfect. Except for one thing." Abe waited for me to supply the missing element.

"He was a crook?"

"Crook? What's a crook? Someone on Wall Street? Worse. Irving was a sneak. Nobody could trust him. With crooks—and I'm not gonna make excuses about what I personally did for a living, only I'm a *bissele* sorry I didn't do things differently, except I never would have lasted as a tailor or a shoemaker—with crooks, you didn't dirty your own nest. You didn't screw the people you lived with, your *lantsmen*, your countrymen, the ones you said prayers with. Irving betrayed everybody every chance he got. But he wasn't psycho like guys I



walked the yard with when I did my time. You could almost forgive them. What did they know better? Irving, though. Irving never fussed with dirty stuff just because it was dirty. He had to benefit from it, make some kind of profit. For a long time he got away with his crookedness because nobody guessed. When they found the truth out, they couldn't believe it, and when they believed it, they couldn't convince anybody else it was true. That's the advantage he had. With me, for a difference, everybody always believed worse than I was."

"Why didn't you warn my grandmother? You were her friend. You cared about Ruth."

The afternoon sun hit Abe like a spotlight. "A friend shuts up sometimes. Because I did care, I had to keep quiet. And also," he paused, "because I was Icepick Abe, for all that stuff matters. Pull the shades, will you? But Ruthie was smart. She knew something about Irving didn't fit right. That's why she wouldn't go steady with him. She'd spend time with him, but she'd also go on dates with other guys."

"Is this okay?" I slid the drapes closed. "Grandmother Ruth the belle of the ball. Hard to believe. She's such a dried-up, unpleasant woman. Be happy you've got your memories. They're better than the truth."

Gripping his coffee cup with a clenched fist, Abe breathed slowly. His eyes flashed venom. Though his anger upset me, I refused to be hypocritical about my grandmother, the matriarch who condemned everything we did at home and infected my family life from wakeup alarm to three A.M. television. I couldn't remember a single time she'd laughed pleasantly, for pure enjoyment. But for Abe's sake—and my own interests—I could tell the truth more diplomatically. I tried to lighten my tone. "What made her decide to become Mrs. Weinstein?"

Abe seemed distracted, sorting through the past, seizing on some memories, discarding others. He got up from his chair and walked to the table. "Homemade pound cake. Too rich for me. I love it." With a slice in each hand he went to the empty fireplace, about-faced, and walked to the opposite wall. "I think better when I'm moving."

"That's the way to keep healthy."

"At least I've got a strong heart. Not like your grandfather." He stuffed one slice of cake into his mouth and chewed it hurriedly as he studied the other slice. "Mrs. Weinstein! What a mismatch. Ruthie fell in love with someone else while your grandfather was still chasing her. A boy named Joseph.

Yussel. You got mad at me when I asked you about Adolph Hitler, didn't you?"

"I felt insulted. Was Yussel supposed to be Hitler in disguise?"

"Hitler, Himmler, and that killer gang of Aryans drove Yussel and his family out of Germany. But this country tried to keep them from living here. In the 1930's we were at peace with Germany. The land of the free, the home of the brave had too much unemployment and too many Jews. So, from Canada, Yussel snuck into Brooklyn without papers. At the time, of course, we didn't know that." Abe finished his second piece of cake and waited.

I asked the inevitable question. "So why didn't Ruthie marry Yussel?"

"Because Yussel disappeared."

"Sneaked off somewhere else? Maybe Ruthie scared him away." I began to shift position. Even a couch grows uncomfortable after a while. I remained seated, though. Only one of us could pace at a time—and Abe kept up a vigorous back-and-forth routine, zigzagging around the room to get the greatest distance with every lap. Each step momentarily cratered the blue carpeting until the fibers rebounded to their original shape.

"Don't laugh. That's what Ruthie thought. Either she for-

got what she did or she couldn't imagine what Irving would do. I already told you what kind of human being he was."

My conversations usually run on several levels. On one level I listen to what I hear and answer the actual words that are directed at me. ("How are you?" "I am fine.") On a different but simultaneous level I fill in the thoughts my dialogue partner has skipped, respond to the omissions in my own way, and try to deal with what I've figured out by moving sideways in my spoken response. ("How are you?" "You should have gotten the money a week ago.") What Abe had just told me meant that somehow—crookedly, treacherously—my grandfather had gotten rid of his rival Yussel. I glanced at the tape recorder. Its steady red light reassured me. On replay I'd be able to verify Abe's unspoken meaning when I returned to Brooklyn.

"Are you telling me that Irving caught her on the rebound? Yussel abandoned her, and she took the second one in line. Who ever gets first choice? Is that a reason to be miserable all your life—and torture your family?"

Abe turned from the fireplace. "Boychick, your mind's making faces at me again. I think you're catching on, quicker than we did when things were happen-

ing. See, Yussel, good, honest Yussel—he had no use for me, I'd like you to know—while Yussel and Ruthie were dating, he told her how he was illegally here. If he got arrested, he didn't want her blamed for anything, so he was ready to let her break off the relationship. Ruthie—smart, smart Ruthie, she should've been a Quiz Kid—she mentioned to Irving, strictly in passing, what a nice guy Yussel was for giving her such a choice. A little while later, no more Yussel. Later, on their honeymoon, Irving said something that made Ruthie suspicious, and pieces began to get put together."

"If he just disappeared, you're guessing about what happened."

Shaking his head, Abe sighed. "No guessing. You know about me. Enough for now, at any rate. I did bad things. Let's leave it at that. I did bad things, but I had good friends. When Ruthie got suspicious, she asked me if I could find out about Yussel. If she'd known she was pregnant from her honeymoon—not from before, I'd bet on that—she probably wouldn't have said a word. Tough luck. We had enough cops on the payroll for me to twist a favor here and there. So I found out. The immigration people followed Yussel on the subway one day, grabbed him, and shipped him out of the

country. In those days they weren't so fussy like now about cleaning up a mess. The way they latched onto Yussel was that your grandfather, Irving, reported him. Irving swore he was illegal and a bigtime mobster. Whether Yussel got thrown back to Hitler and the death camps or got lucky somewhere else, nobody could pin down. He's gone. File's closed."

"I never realized . . ."

"In her apartment I told her myself. On the second floor, Stone Avenue. She was making chicken dinner. That story I wouldn't hide. Not to save a Nazi bum like Irving. Oh she cried, she cried. Even you, young fella, no matter how much you say you hate her, you would have felt sorry for your grandmother. 'Abe,' she said, 'it's my fault. I killed Yussel. Now I'm gonna do the right thing and kill Irving.' I asked her to wait a few days. 'Cool down. Go visit friends in the Bronx. You'll feel better when you get back.' That's portable, isn't it?" Abe pointed at my tape recorder. "Works on batteries. Not like my radio, eh?" He gestured at the radio on his bookshelf.

"Yes, it is. Easy to take on the plane." I felt confused. What difference did my recorder make? "But it just handles tapes. No radio."

With a snap Abe turned on his

bookcase radio, to a call-in talk show. "Good sound. Nothing worth hearing. In a few minutes they'll give the scores."

"Abe, please. Don't play games with me. To hell with baseball scores. What happened to my grandfather? Did somebody kill him?"

"Please? You want somebody to hold up his hand and say, 'Look at me, I'm a murderer. Put me away.' That's what you expect? No. Ruthie was lucky. While she was away, Irving died of a heart attack. All by himself, in his bathtub. By coincidence, I needed to use the bathroom. She'd lent me a key to the apartment so I'd make sure the ice from the icebox wouldn't overflow. That's how I was the one who found him. End of story."

"No, it's not!" I pounded on the table. The recorder and the cake plate jumped at the impact. "What happened? What really happened?"

Abe ended his pacing. He sat down in his easy chair. I stood up from the couch. The sun behind my back threw my shadow across the coffee table, almost to Abe's feet. Touching a finger to his lips, Abe stared at the tape recorder. For the first time I could hear its gears meshing, hear the tape whishing through the cassette. Abe shrugged. I punched stop. The red light

went out. As soon as it did, Abe turned off his radio.

"All right, *boychick*," he said. "I told you I used to listen to the games. In those days we didn't have portables. I owned a little radio. I'd carry it with me and plug it in wherever I found a socket. Red Barber was the Dodgers' announcer. From the South somewhere." Calmly, smoothly, he noted my irritation. "Be patient. Your grandfather made the mistake of getting mad when he should have told me he was sorry. If we were alone, maybe he could've beaten me up. Maybe not. When you don't have rules, you can never be too sure of each other. But I had a few friends with me, people I worked with. They kept everybody calm. We talked nicely to your grandfather, but he didn't know what we were talking about. He didn't know any Yussel. He wouldn't even say how much he loved Ruthie. To him she was somebody he could take to bed when he decided to come home for a night. He got too nervous. Sweating a lot. So a bath was a good idea for him to relax. Then a terrible thing happened. I wanted to hear the Dodgers-Cards score. I plugged in my radio, and I heard two men on, seventh inning, and we were behind by one run. I got so excited I dropped my ra-



dio. Sssss! A terrible thing. It fell in the tub with your grandfather. A terrible accident."

"No heart attack?"

Nodding seriously, Abe said, "Definitely a heart attack. Why should I get in trouble just for talking to Irving? Or my friends either? My friends and I shook hands, they went away, and *ech!*, I found your grandfather lying in the tub. I had to run to the candy store for a telephone to ring up an ambulance. You think anyone cared about a big autopsy in those days? Not for poor people. 'Heart attack' is right on the death certificate." Politely, but decisively, Abe bowed and gestured towards the front door. "If that's what the government wrote down, I'm too old to call them liars."

I picked up my recorder and notepad. "Abe, thank you. I'm sorry. I appreciate what you've

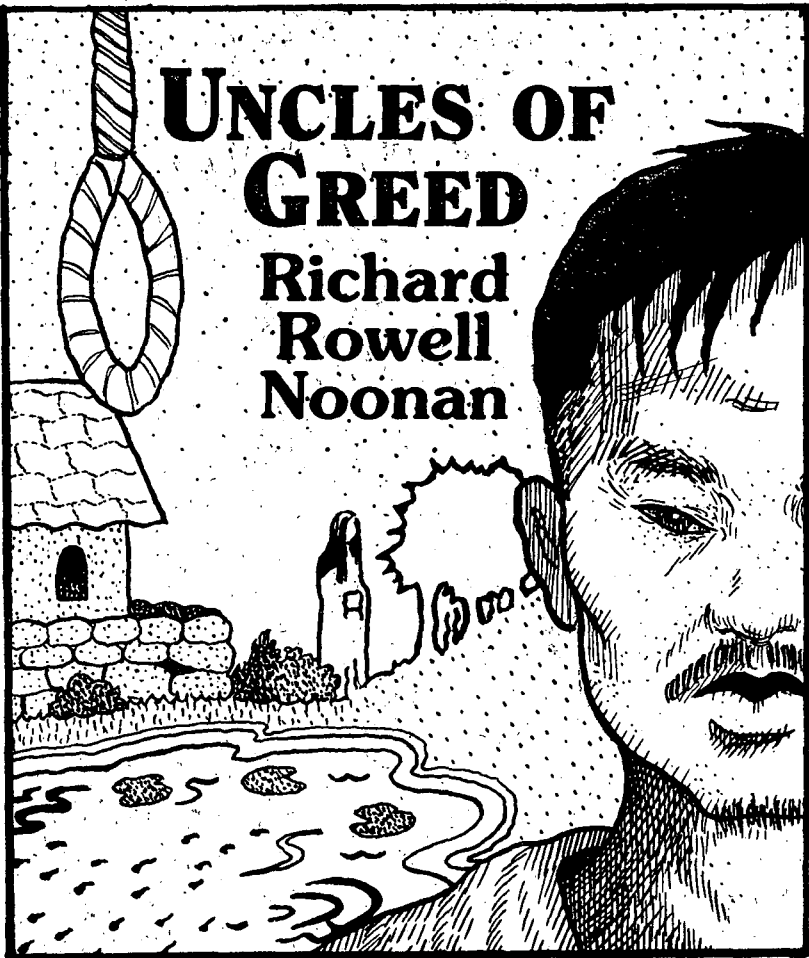
told me, but something's wrong." As he opened the door, I continued. "Thank your sister, too. But you know, in those old buildings, a radio falling into a bathtub wouldn't have killed anyone. What would have happened is that the fuse would have blown. A cheap fuse, a short circuit, probably a little shock. That's all."

Abe smiled at me. Cheerfully. "You're right. You're absolutely right. You're smart, like Ruthie. Even like Irving. We gotta give him credit for brains, that rotten son-of-a-bitch." I must have looked exasperated. Abe shrugged. "Landlords always used the cheapest stuff. So what could we do? We put in a bigger fuse and tried a few more times. After the funeral, Ruthie bought me a new radio. A Philco." When he closed the door he was still smiling.



# UNCLES OF GREED

Richard  
Rowell  
Noonan



**E**nglish is like the sound of hens gabbling on the floor of my honorable mother's kitchen.

I, Ahsan Lee, speak no English although I and a gang of my fellow villagers have toiled for two years and three months on the Central Pacific Railroad, first hauling ballast from tunnels blasted through California's Sierra Mountains, later hacking ledges down the Nevada slope into the forests of Truckee Canyon and onto

this great American desert. Nor does either of my two fellow prisoners speak English. It is of no consequence. I have done nothing for which I fear punishment.

Yet each morning, with our hands bound, I and Yin Jung are brought to this sweltering canvas and board shanty beside the box-cars on the siding in Palisade. The breath of this place reeks of tobacco and Red Jacket whisky, which the gluttonous Irishmen consume each night. Still Algis Burnside, Honorable Circuit Judge for the Territory of Nevada, requires that we sit and listen to his weary inquiries into the murder of an Irish tracklayer. My friend Bhin Kai, in a delirium from a blow to his head, remains in his shanty muttering to his straw mat.

Today is the third day of inquiry. For two additional days we awaited Judge Burnside's arrival from Shoshone. Therefore, today is the fifth day for which we shall receive no wages, and still Judge Burnside has not learned the truth that each of the six hundred coolies in Palisade has known for each of those five days: Yin Jung stabbed the tracklayer.

In my village of Tonggou a magistrate would have learned this truth in a single day; when one is tortured, does not truth flow as freely as trout in a stream? On the second day Yin Jung's head would have been separated from his body on the village square chopping block. In China this inquiry would now be ended.

True, I have not revealed what I saw. Nor should I. One must not speak against one's countrymen outside of one's work gang. I stated to Zhou Gou, the paymaster's clerk who interprets the endless gabble of this inquiry, that I and Bhin Kai had merely been strolling when we heard a vicious squabble coming from the shack where each night the Irishmen spread blankets on which to gamble. I said that, like many others, we had hurried toward the noise, but we had seen no stabbing.

"All rise." Boots scuff. Benches scrape.

Clutching official papers, Judge Burnside stoops through the sunlit flap. Wearing a frilled white shirt with a black string tie around his wattled neck, he looks like a scrawny soup chicken. Several camp bosses follow him, and Zhou Gou enters carrying his payroll ledger and the box containing his bottle of ink and quills.

At the side windows, propped open with poles, the tops of several camp workers' unkempt heads appear. Now follow their unwashed faces. Perhaps this tiresome proceeding will end today.

Mr. Charlie Crocker strides in from the morning glare with his

spurs chonging. How the air bristles! Like a Yankee rooster, Crocker struts across the floor and examines each of Judge Burnside's papers. Crocker is a devil! He appears everywhere without warning, sees everything, knows everything. It was Crocker who, even before O'Mera fell, charged into the crowd on his chestnut stallion and, flailing his pistol, cracked Bhin Kai's skull with a single blow. I myself had been knocked to the ground and barely escaped those huge, thudding hooves. True, I was present. But what of that? The small amount of blood on my tunic I received by cradling my friend's head in my lap.

As I wait, I remember the lucky day I and Bhin Kai were chosen by the Central Pacific Railroad agent to work in America for two dollars each day. True, in return for meals and steamship passage, we agreed to repay one dollar for each day that we are here, but fishermen in Tonggou must toil for one year to earn ten dollars. Maidens like Ling Maliang, with her delicate round face, mend fish-nets all year for three dollars. Trackbeds are brutal, dangerous work, and many of my newly arrived countrymen whine to me that white immigrants receive three dollars for each day's work. "What," they ask, "do you say of that?"

"That," I say, "is none of my concern." Nor is it. In nine months I shall return to Tonggou with nine hundred American dollars—I shall be a wealthy man!

I shall buy a house with a tile roof to deflect rain and a stone wall to contain a garden and a lily pond inhabited by tiny, silvery minnows. Beside my pond shall grow magnolia trees and cherry trees, and beside my small pond I shall meditate. I shall ask the father of Ling Maliang to permit her to be my wife. Beside my pond with darting, silvery fish, Ling Maliang shall open her clothes to me, and she shall bless us with children from the warm, secret well within her.

The gabble has stopped.

"Prisoners, rise." Zhou Gou, nodding, interprets Judge Burnside's truths.

"First, this here court finds all three Chinaboys guilty of gambling on the Sabbath; be they God-fearing Christians or heathens, that's against Nevada law, and I'm fining each two hundred dollars."

*The wages of twenty years!* The judge dips the quill into the ink bottle and scratches his name across three of his official papers.

"As to the murder of Trevor O'Mera," Zhou Gou continues to interpret Burnside's ludicrous truths. "Since the doc said Bhin Kai's

mind is permanently addled from a blow struck during the fracas, I'll order Bhin Kai deported."

Again, the quill scratches across a paper.

"Having heard everyone out, including these here Chinaboys, the court believes that the blood on Ahsan Lee's clothes was his friend's, as he said, not the victim's. But he is guilty of lying to this court about what he saw. I'm sentencing Ahsan Lee to ten years of hard labor for obstructing justice."

*Ten years!* Like waves driven by a monsoon, these words batter me and wash the earth from beneath my feet.

"Troops from Fort Scott will escort both Chinaboys to Nevada Territorial Penitentiary, Carson City. There Bhin Kai will be given over to the U.S. Marshal, who'll see to the deportation."

The wisdom of this wrinkled-skinned chicken is inscrutable. *Honorable One, a knife to you!*

"Lastly, the Chinaboy nearest the victim and caught with the most blood on him was Yin Jung. He'll be hanged for the murder of Trevor O'Mera. Charlie Crocker is hereby appointed temporary marshal for the Territory of Nevada to oversee the execution."

Judge Burnside lifts his wattle and glances at the grimfaced Crocker. "Charlie tells me camp's moving to Moleen tomorrow, so I'll order Jung hanged at noon the following day, which is a damn shame because I'll be holding court at Walker Lake then." He turns his head and angles a brown spit-stream onto the hardpacked floor.

"Guess I'll miss the show."

The unwashed faces drop below the window.

Through the small opening in the wooden door of my shack, I watch Browdy, the man who guards us. Throughout the cloudless afternoon Browdy sits under his gray, slouch-brimmed hat on a barrel outside of Yin Jung's shanty. Twice he has risen, rubbed his grizzled beard, and urinated against the tent of my friend Bhin Kai. Now his red-veined eyes close, open slowly. His dirty hands hang between his legs, lifeless. Black flies natter around his head.

Tomorrow the soldiers will come for me and Bhin Kai.

I will be taken to prison.

Over and over I remember how Yin Jung snatched the coins from the blanket; how O'Mera rose, shirtless, his blond-haired arms gradually bending at the elbows, his huge hands closing. Did Yin Jung then turn and leave with the winnings? No!—Jung shook his coins under the Irishman's nose; O'Mera swung his left hand like a

sledge. Yin Jung ducked and snickered, but the tracklayer retained his balance and poise, and struck the side of Yin's head with his other fist. Yin's coins dropped from his hands to a muffled jingle on the blanket, and he stumbled against a boxcar. Hoots swirled out from among the onlookers. Then, chattering like a mad squirrel, Yin Jung ran at O'Mera. I remember a glint. As their bodies slapped together, Yin's knife disappeared into the white crescent of flesh below the tracklayer's ribs.

"Chow time," Browdy bellows through the door. The wooden door latch clacks, and the door swings outward. I am blinded by daylight.

"Ahsan Lee?" Old Chong enters, feeling with small, cautious feet. "Such . . . dimness." Squatting, he lowers a yoke with a reed basket on each end from his shoulders. Scents of green tea, scallions, and cooked meat flood the air. "Some good luck stumbled into today's pot," grins Chong.

"Has Bhin Kai eaten?" I ask.

"Sadly, no." Avoiding my gaze, Chong removes several clay pots from the baskets. "I gave your friend some soup. He spews up everything. Dull, his eyes."

"If I give you ginseng, will you prepare broth for him?"

"There is no cure for the evil sickness that bad luck has brought your friend. It is five days since his injury. Each day his deliriums grow stronger; each day he grows weaker."

"Ginseng wards off all such evils."

"Ahsan Lee, you know this sickness. We have seen it many times before in the Sierra passes, in the tunnels." He slaps his forehead. "If one struck thus by a rock is sick for one or two days, he is lucky. But when his sickness persists longer, evil spirits enter the head, the brain becomes swollen, crushes itself."

"Make his broth and you may keep half the ginseng."

"I will do as you ask, but I will not keep a portion of a dying man's medicine. Tomorrow Yankee soldiers come. Bhin Kai, if he is still alive, will not survive the journey. Think of yourself now. Ten years is harsh, so . . . unjust."

"Ten years are merely ten years, neither just nor unjust. By that much I shall be removed from the rewards of my toils."

"You are too young to be a philosopher. Wait until you are an old man tickling your grandchildren for that."

"I am tranquil with my fate."

"Bahh!" Chong waves off a fly. "Such talk sounds foolish when there are remedies, those that can help you."

"But after the stabbing, Crocker sent all of the coolies from Tonggou to grade trackbeds beyond Moleen, beyond even the railhead. Who can help me?"

Chong places a bowl of sliced meat in front of me. "Is not Paymaster's Clerk Zhou Gou from Tonggou? He has helped others avoid Yankee injustice before, provided remedies."

"Remedies? To whom?"

"The cooks talk, but I must respect your tranquility." Chong shrugs, "If you aren't interested . . ."

"No! Please wait, Chong. Can you tell Zhou Gou I greatly desire to learn more of such remedies?"

Chong hoists his yoke to his shoulders and, nodding, slips quietly into the street. Through the opening I watch him patter past Yin Jung's shack to the paymaster's railcar.

The imposing portion of fresh meat heaped into my bowl is succulent, and although it is tough, I savor it. While I chew it slowly, my ears prickle at the low, plaintive wail of the work train returning from the railhead. This train must enter camp at a pace no greater than an old mule. As the engine itself approaches the siding, it sniffs, scents, its many valves spurt out streams of vapor. Its immense driver-wheels turn cautiously, suspicious of the strangely grooved switch plates that divert them into the siding. I listen to each car's wheels screech in slow succession as their rims encounter the curved rails. With the locomotive's final steam-filled sigh, workmen spill from flatcars, and Palisade overflows with the perky chatter of Chinese and the lumbering babble of English.

Zhou Gou, wearing his green silk jacket and baggy white trousers, enters. He is also the third son of the Deputy Regent of Tonggou Village, and he smells of oils and soaps. From his cheeks hangs the wispy beard of a scholar, and in his thin hands, which appear even thinner because his fingernails are long and thin and tapered, he holds a long-stemmed pipe.

"Speak softly, Ahsan Lee," he warns, settling himself crosslegged on the mat. "Words, like feathers on a breeze, often travel farther than eyes can see." I glance at the shadows that, accompanied by footfalls, scuff past my door. Some move very briskly, others much less so.

"I understand."

"Good. You seek some . . . remedy?"

"Yes, a pardon, Zhou Gou."

"Regrettably, forgiveness is not a virtue that Charlie Crocker embraces easily."

"But I thought—"

"Things change," Zhou snorts. "Tomorrow hundreds of new coolies arrive from Shoshone. The sentences Crocker told Judge Burnside to impose are intended to serve as object lessons for these newcomers. The fines, your imprisonment, Yin Jung's execution: all meant to insure these coolies will render full and obedient measures of labor for their wages. You are fortunate the Irishman received a single wound or you would stand beside Yin Jung on the gallows."

"Then no pardon is possible?"

"Listen carefully." He leans forward, lowering his voice. "Tonight Bhin Kai will die."

"No! He may live. I have ginseng—"

A flick of Zhou Gou's fingers quiets. "No, Ahsan Lee! I am certain he will die tonight. I have been to his tent. You would barely recognize your friend." Zhou's words scathe me, yet I know they are true. He adds, "The regrettable death of Bhin Kai must be entered beside his name in the paymaster's ledger. I am the keeper of that ledger."

Of what consequence is that to me? "Continue, please."

"If the name I record in the ledger is yours, Ahsan Lee, who will know whether the body wrapped in the burial cloth is Bhin Kai's or yours?" Zhou lifts a finger. "The Yankee soldiers who will take you to prison and Bhin Kai for deportation? No! Nor the raw-eyed Browdy who guards his whisky flask more closely than his prisoners."

"Crocker will know!" I say, feeling my tongue thicken.

"No, young Ahsan, he is already in Moleen."

"But if he returns, Crocker is everywhere!"

"He has no reason, what's left here for him?"

"But Crocker sees, knows everything!"

"Crocker knows what the bosses tell him," says Zhou, leaning forward. "He sees only what stands in the way of his precious tracks. To Crocker, coolies are like sacks of rice, commodities to be used up constructing the Central Pacific Railroad."

If Zhou is right . . . perhaps. My scalp tingles.

"Bhin Kai's unlucky accident will be your good fortune if you are wise enough *and bold enough* to snatch the opportunity."

"But my friend's name. My honorable grandfather used to tell me it is written in the *Tract of Virtuous Ways* that if one steals from a



dying man that man's spirit will taunt the thief forever. I will be stealing Bhin's name."

"I am neither a priest nor a prophet." Zhou Gou smooths the front of his jacket. "But I believe great bouts of laughter will erupt from your grandfather's grave—in fact from among all the ancestral spirits in Tonggou—when they see you carving roast pig and drinking rice wine in your mother's kitchen *while Crocker thinks* you are boiling turnips and tea leaves in some Yankee prison." His face brightens. "Will not Bhin Kai laugh loudest?"

"Ahh, yes!" Beaming, I say, "Tell me, what is the price of so much hilarity?"

Zhou Gou strikes a match. His eyes glow as he brings its flame to the bowl of his pipe. "I would do it for the simple joy of knowing you have outwitted these blue-eyed beasts. I curse all Americans and their ancestors for eight generations!"

"Then you will arrange it?"

A gust of Zhou's breath extinguishes his match. "I am not one of sufficient influence or wealth to provide the remedy alone. There are dangers." Zhou Gou passes a stream of smoke through his nostrils. "Unfortunately, those whose help I need do not take risks for nothing—the *greedy uncles*."

"What do they want to help me?"

"For such a risk they require four hundred American dollars."

I lower my eyes. "Already I have been fined two hundred dollars. If I pay these *greedy uncles* this additional sum, I will return to China with no more than twenty dollars and an empty rice bowl."

"In China even twenty Yankee dollars is a small fortune." Zhou Gou's eyebrows arch; I am reminded of gulls above the fish wharfs of Tonggou, spread-winged and hovering. In the dim light I can almost hear their clear, shrill cries. "One year's wages in exchange for ten years of your life?"

"In prison I will be forced to labor for scraps of food that Yankees throw prisoners, but I will return home with the wages of perhaps forty years in my purse."

"You may believe the patience of Asia is in your marrow, young Lee," snorts Zhou, "but ten years is a very long time; and the time you have to decide is short. When the camp moves to Moleen, any help I can offer you now may be beyond reach."

"I will not pay what they ask. It's too much."

Zhou Gou points the moist tip of his pipestem at my nose. "Miss

this opportunity and your unborn children will weep for eternity at your foolishness."

"So, you are a prophet as well as a paymaster's clerk!"

"Want to die in prison?—pay what is asked!"

I brush the pipe aside and lean into the space between us. "Who are these greedy uncles whose assistance you require?"

"No, to reveal their names is too dangerous."

"Why do they need so much, so very much?"

"For them I cannot speak."

"Yet you do! Are you one of them, *uncle*?"

"Lower your voice!"

"You are one, aren't you!"

Swiftly, he rises. I, too, stand. The heat growing in my chest dizzies me. The wooden doorlatch lifts. Chong enters. Quietly he gathers his empty bowls.

Zhou Gou studies me with calm eyes. "I must prepare to move to Moleen," he says. "You have precious little time in which to reflect."

Bowls clatter into Chong's baskets. Zhou moves to the old man. They step outside, and I watch them walk to Yin Jung's shack, speaking quietly.

The remaining daylight trembles, climbs up the sides of tents as the sun drops behind the hills. With shadows comes bitter cold, and the moans from Bhin Kai's tent grow in the fading light. I am grateful for the sounds of men disassembling the campsite: the leathery shuffle of boots, the collapse of canvas tents, the creaking of packing cases and wooden-axled carts. From the siding come the clanks of iron tools being loaded on flatcars, and the hissing, spitting valves of a great locomotive. The Americans have named this locomotive Juniper. Juniper's firebox will glow throughout the night with logs cut from the forests of Truckee Canyon.

As many forms pass my shack, I drift back to Truckee, its aspens trembling with greenness, its nameless brooks teeming with tiny minnows that I and Bhin Kai discovered while wringing stream water from our laundry. Those silvery fishes, I told Bhin, shall glide like bright clouds beneath the surface of my pond; Ling Maliang's moonbright image drifts to me in half shadow; white-clad legs emerge from Bhin Kai's tent. Juniper's whistle moans fitfully.

I blink at plum blotches ripening in a sky soon to be emptied of stars. My thoughts return from Ling Maliang. I sense a change in the direction of the air, and I realize the mutters of Bhin Kai have ceased.

\*

Browdy's nose and mouth are covered with a yellow and black-diamonded scarf, and he motions me and Yin Jung to Bhin's tent. When he draws back the flap, flies whip through the slats of light like sparks. The warm morning air holds up a stench to my nostrils. In a shadow-filled corner Bhin Kai lies on his blanket as a curled leaf lies, naked, waiting to be hidden by snow.

Browdy prods his horse across an empty ridge.

Our meager procession through this treeless plain is unreal and unnatural. I plod behind Yin Jung, who carries the foot of the burial board. Bhin Kai is wrapped in a burial cloth of canvas that I have torn from his tent, and although sadness hovers about me, I sense an unfolding of relief now that Bhin Kai's torments are ended. Paths are unmarked here, except for winnowed imprints of lizards and random coyote spoor. The ground is not lush with green, nor is the way strewn with rosepetals and peach blossoms. No bell tolls; no priests intone funeral chants or swing fuming censers, yet there is no way to return Bhin Kai to his ancestral burial place.

Staring at streaks of sweat on Yin Jung's stout neck, I contemplate his fate. There resides in me unspoken joy in the knowledge that for him there will be no declining years, no wife with whom to shed his passion, no children to venerate him. Although my arms grow tired, my shoulders and back quiver, and desert air spreads a dull ache across my lungs, I relish it because I know that Yin Jung too suffers this pain.

Browdy spurs his horse ahead to a dried wash and drops a pickax and a shovel where I and Yin Jung must hack and scrape a grave from the cracked brown earth. In my hands the pickax's handle bites whenever its head strikes a stone, and there are many heavy stones. Under the glare of the sun I am soon bathed in sweat.

Wrapped in paper is some sliced meat I have saved, a lump of ginseng root, rice. These I place in a hollow scooped from the earth at the head of the grave, an offering to his spirit. I mark this place in my memory in order to describe it to Bhin Kai's parents. It is lonely and remote. Nevertheless, I will tell them that a more fitting burial place could hardly have been found, for scarcely one hundred yards away is a cliff of yellow, plum, and mandarin red. Like a temple it rises from the earth to the height of twenty men. No person could lie in the shadow of this majestic shrine without knowing he rests in a magical place. This, of itself, will atone for the absence of ancient

rites. A large bird glides across the sky, circles, and disappears into the glare of the sun.

I and Yin Jung, now unencumbered by the burial board, carry the tools. Browdy rides behind us, his long gun slung across his saddle. Pausing on the ridge above Palisade, we can see where the tents of six hundred coolies stood yesterday. Few remain baking under the vast sky, a few shanties, the empty siding, a livery, the section gang's barracks, and long, gleaming rails.

The air keens faintly.

Like a centipede suddenly streaming out from under the folds of my blanket, a work train bursts from between the hills below Shoshone; its flatcars bristle with longhandled tools held by many hundreds of coolies. As this train hurtles toward Palisade, a switchman hurries across the track to the switch at the siding. He heaves on its iron handle, inching it upright; rods withdraw the switchplate from the main track. The switchman waves. Whistle screaming, the engine bears down on the man, then past the man, past the switch, past the stand, the siding, the shanties, shacks, tents, and with repetitive metallic clacks, railcars bypass Palisade and stream, one behind another, along the tracks and out into the low rolling hills of the vast American desert.

Black smoke climbs, churning, from the engine's diamondshaped stack into the vibrant sky and curls inward on itself like a huge, dark, angry flower. It then opens and spreads over the plain. And then I know I must escape this land of men who worship machines with offerings of iron rails and twisted spikes and wooden ties and Chinamen's bones.

Chong's eyes are masks. "You meant no disrespect? Zhou Gou will be pleased to learn that you addressed him as *greedy uncle* out of respect."

"As well, I have reflected further on his advice and wish to accept his generous offer to assist me."

"Boss Crocker ordered the paymaster's railcar to Moleen today, and Zhou Gou with it. Many additional coolies arrived while you were in the desert." Old Chong places a simple rice dish on the corner of my mat.

"You must get him a message."

He suppresses a yawn. "That may not be possible."

"Do you know, has Zhou Gou already recorded Bhin Kai's death in the paymaster's ledger?"

"If so, your opportunity has flown," Chong simpers, "and what do I say if he asks what you will offer the greedy uncles?"

"You may say I will discuss that with him!"

Trace chains jingle. Hooves thud. Suddenly a buckboard and mounted escorts shudder through camp. They clatter into a loose circle in front of the livery. A brake scrapes. Blueclad soldiers call back and forth, and a stableboy shrugging up his suspenders stumbles into view; the soldiers dismount, and the boy catches up the reins of their snorting horses. Chong quickly gathers up his pots and shuffles out to show the soldiers to the cooktent.

The Yankee soldiers, having eaten, now settle around their campfire. Growing drowsy as the fire throws shortening blades of light, I wait and watch. No message arrives from Zhou Gou, and as the gelid blackness of night thickens, neither does Chong Pan return for his bowl that I have emptied of rice.

Horses stomp. Browdy's gabble and the gabble of soldiers awaken me. Quickly I arrange my clothes on my blanket and roll a tight bundle which I fasten on both ends. Satisfied that my preparedness will anger no one, I sit on the floor. I wait.

Many minutes pass.

Still the wooden latch does not lift.

Outside, footsteps shuffle.

Perhaps I have dozed.

A teamster whistles. Halter chains clash, and amidst snorting and stomping hooves, iron rims clatter past my shack and out of Palisade. Visible through the opening, a single mule-drawn cart approaches on the path from Moleen; it has emerged from the point where the rails vanish in the desert.

The morning air shimmers, yet I welcome the breath of sunshine on my neck as I follow Chong to the mule cart where Browdy is tethering.

"Where are the soldiers, Chong?"

"Crocker ordered them to leave," murmurs Chong through a thin smile.

"Am I to be taken to . . ."

"Prison? No." Chong waves a folded paper in the air. "Zhou Gou has arranged for you to go to Moleen."

"Have I received a pardon?"

"What do I know? I cannot read. I am a scrubber of pots, not a scholar. It is in this paper which the driver, Hsiao, has brought."

Exchanging polite nods with the driver I ask Chong, "When did Zhou Gou arrange my release?"

Browdy, mopping his face with his yellow bandanna, grunts at me to climb onto the cartbed behind the driver. Chong hands the paper to Browdy.

"What are . . . the conditions?"

"That you must settle with Zhou Gou."

"Shaddup!" Browdy growls. Swinging onto the cart, he stuffs the paper into his shirt pocket. "Chop, chop." The driver's stick taps the mules, and the cart bounces stiffly into the ruts beside the iron rails.

"Why hurry so, Hsiao?"

"Big Boss Mr. Crocker said I must return by noon."

Browdy bawls, "Shaddup, you chinks." This much English I understand. I merely grin at Browdy and lower my head, pleased that Mr. Crocker will permit me to return to work. No doubt Zhou will demand compensation. Very well, although I agreed to no fee, I will gladly pay something, perhaps half of the additional one hundred and thirty dollars I can earn before my return to China. Yes, but only if Zhou Gou will arrange for me to rejoin my fellow workers from Tonggou.

The sun is still rising, and already I smell the sweat of the mules straining on the cart's shaft. I am reminded of mules hauling stone ballast to the track grades. Suddenly one would stumble, fall, lurch up to its knees, and roll onto its side. Splotches have appeared on Browdy's shirt, and wet rivulets streak Hsiao's face. Yet I bear the desert's heat with a light heart, for I am pleased with my turn of good luck.

Browdy now removes his hat and squints at me. With his forefinger he wipes the sweatband, and flicking away the moisture, he grumbles at Hsiao.

"Honorable passenger." Hsiao angles a glance over his shoulder toward me. "Mr. Browdy wonders why you smile on such a day."

"Because I am glad to be out of confinement."

"That is no reason to smile."

"Am I not going to Moleen to be pardoned?"

Hsiao's glance angles farther toward me. "You are being taken to Moleen to be separated from your spirit, Yin Jung, to be hanged."

*Yin Jung? Hanged!* Enormous moths flutter in my chest. "I am not the one to be hanged! True, the Yankees sentenced Yin Jung to be hanged, but I am Ahsan Lee!"

"Ah, so!" Hsiao blurts out a stream of English.

Browdy, as though stung by a scorpion, jolts upright. Looking

shocked and frightened, he curses at Hsiao who now repeats his gabble, this time more slowly, more deliberately. Browdy's eyes hop from me to Hsiao and back. "Ahsan Lee?"

"Yes!" I nod vigorously. Deep, irregular trenches crease his forehead. "Ahsan Lee! I am Ahsan Lee."

In the rhythm of the mules, Hsiao has shortened the reins, anticipating the command to turn around. No doubt we have traveled more than half of the distance to Moleen. Staring intently at his sorrel, Browdy covers his mouth and draws his hand down his mustaches, perhaps wondering if he should gallop back to Palisade for Yin Jung. The cart slows further. Now Browdy lets out a gruff squawk and with the muzzle of his pistol pokes my ribs goodnaturedly. He yammers happily at Hsiao, who then snaps his stick. The mules trot onward.

"Are we turning around, Hsiao? This is a good place."

"Mr. Browdy praises your cleverness, Yin Jung. Momentarily you frightened him, pretending to be Ahsan Lee, but he says you cannot cheat fate."

"But I *am* Ahsan Lee!"

Browdy waves my protest aside with his pistol, shifts his weight, and mumbles amicably at Hsiao.

"Do not be afraid," Hsiao begins cautiously. "Mr. Browdy fought in a great war between the American states, and he says that he has seen many noble men die. He believes that hanging is a most humane method, painless like . . ." Browdy snaps his fingers. ". . . breaking the neck of a chicken. One drops to the end of a rope and awakens in paradise."

"I *am not* Yin Jung!"

"Shut your lousy flytrap!" Browdy points the black hole of his pistol at my forehead and snarls through his teeth.

"Mr. Browdy warns," says Hsiao, "you must attempt no further deception; otherwise he will force a rag into your mouth for the remainder of our journey."

I bow my head. Browdy lowers his pistol, and Hsiao clucks at the mules. The path now turns away from the railbed where a ledge is carved into the base of a hill, and the mules strain on the shaft of the cart, slowing as they climb the embankment above the tracks.

We ride in silence. I ponder this mistake. Yankees look upon coolies in the way that a Chinese looks upon a bowl of rice, as a oneness, a whole, not as individual grains; therefore faceless: a Chinaman is to be hanged. Browdy's orders are to deliver the prisoner.



Therefore, the slow-minded Browdy brings a Chinaman to Moleen for execution.

Browdy spits a stream of tobacco juice onto the road and wipes the brown tailings from his whiskers with the back of his hand. For him the matter is closed. Why not? One Chinaman or another. Of what consequence is it to Browdy?

Before the cart reaches the crest of the hill, clothcovered arms appear in the sky, turning as pinwheels turn. I have heard of wind machines that magically lift water from beneath the desert. Beside this machine stands a plump wooden water tank girdled with iron bands, and its spout is raised like a giant teapot set down among the procession of hills. Now the shanties of Moleen enter my view, and a great pond of whitetopped tents crowds the flats. The plumes of many cookfires populate the air.

The mules, having smelled water, increase their pace, and the path descends sharply. Despite the drag Hsiao applies with the foot-brake, the wheels clatter, we pitch dangerously, and I and Browdy clutch at sideboards. The cart jerks, shudders sideways, and when I am certain we will topple over and be crushed beneath the cart, the ruts rejoin the trackbed. The swaying subsides. As we enter the rows of tents, white laborers stare brazenly at me. My countrymen avert their eyes as the cart passes, but I feel their glances upon my back. The mules trot eagerly through the streets of tents and up to the foot of the water tank in the shadow of which is the gallows.

On the platform stands Charlie Crocker himself overseeing the work. Overhead, a crude crosspiece rests on square posts that are guyed with wire. He calls out an order, and a Chinese wearing the black armlet and headband of a foreman tugs at a lever bolted to the platform. Wood creaks. Suddenly a trapdoor plummets from the gallows with a fierce bang. A rope quivers like a bowstring; on its end, rice bags kick wildly in the air.

"Beautiful!" Crocker shouts. As coolies pull the trapdoor back up to the platform on ropes, Crocker bends over the railing and hollers down to Browdy, "Bring up your Chinaboy."

I am prodded up the ladder. Beneath me on one side are the mess tents of the white tracklayers and blacksmiths, on the other side are the new coolies with their sledges, shovels, and grubbing hoes. Beyond them, astride the track, hissing and sniffing the air like a great impatient insect, stands Juniper.

Crocker stoops over to watch the workmen untie the rice bags; I glance at the foreman and see my opportunity.

"Honorable foreman, I am not the one to be hanged." He snorts and steps back, doubtless wary of being addressed by a condemned man. "I have been pardoned." I point at Browdy. "My guard has made a mistake. My pardon is in his shirt pocket." The foreman looks at me nervously and folds his arms across his chest. "Honorable sir, *I beg you*—ask him. Help me!"

Abruptly he turns, gabbles at Browdy, and gestures to his pocket. The paper that Browdy produces is unfolded and examined by the foreman. I see fleeting images of how Ling Maliang will first gasp in horror, then sigh pleurably when she learns this story. But the foreman glares at me imperiously.

"This is your execution order, Yin Jung, not a pardon."

"Browdy!" Crocker steps gingerly onto the drop. With a satisfied grunt he lifts a shiny brass watch by its chain from his watch pocket and opens the cover. "Ready the Chinaboy."

"Yes, sir!" Browdy shoves me onto the trap.

"No!" I twist from Browdy's grasp and shout at Crocker, "I not Yin Jung!—I am Ahsan Lee!"

Snapping the watch cover shut, Crocker strides to the edge of the gallows and calls down. Hsiao leaps from the cart and disappears in the direction of the paymaster's car.

Zhou Gou ascends the ladder clutching his ledger to his chest and, coming out in front of the foreman, solemnly inclines his head. The foreman pushes the crumpled order of execution at him saying, "This coolie claims to be Ahsan Lee."

Glancing coldly at me, Zhou Gou opens his ledger, smooths back a page. "No, Ahsan Lee is dead," Zhou answers and turns the ledger for the foreman to see.

A breath catches in my throat. "I am not dead!"

"No, *Ahsan Lee* is dead," he snaps, lifting his chin in the direction of Palisade. "And buried in the desert."

"If Ahsan Lee is dead," I say, "then am I Bhin Kai?"

The foreman's eyes glint at me; Zhou Gou calmly turns another page. His thin hand skims down a column of names and stops. "Soldiers took Bhin Kai this morning for deportation."

"If that is true, where is Yin Jung?" I ask.

Zhou Gou extends a long finger. "You are Yin Jung!"

The venom of a thousand serpents fills my mouth.

"I am Ahsan Lee!"

A coarse laugh from Browdy brushes the back of my neck. Zhou Gou closes his ledger, and the foreman steps aside to allow him to

pass. Browdy now twists my arms behind my back.

Crocker barks a command.

Below, camp bosses repeat his order.

The newcomers rise and beat the dirt from their clothes. A cloud of yellow dust lifts up from their midst as they move toward the gallows. Browdy pushes me onto the drop and binds my hands. Track-layers jostle to improve their view; as they press closer to the base of the gallows, I am reminded of pigs crowding a trough. Browdy cinches the knots too tightly. The cord cuts my wrists. I wince but say nothing; this discomfort will not last.

An expectant hush descends.

Browdy lowers a thick, hairy rope; its stiff hairs prickle my chin when he adjusts the loop.

"Painless," he whispers, "like a chicken, Yin Jung."

I say simply, "I am Ahsan Lee."

In the shade beneath his slouch-brimmed hat, Browdy's grizzled face softens. I have not shouted. I have not protested. Does he now believe I have merely stated the truth: *I am Ahsan*—he blurs from view.

My feet are air. I am without weight.

And Browdy is mistaken.

Bone splinters pierce my neck. Whiteness blinds. I plunge through nets of pale-veined light. Flesh and sinew stretch, and, and, and I see . . . a shine as bright as a peacock's feather angled toward the sun. This feather spreads, lifts, lifts again and sheds my form.

Soundlessness hovers, settles, and remains for many moments. Each moment lingers. Sand shifts.

I stir, flutter, and, thus awakened, drift with desert colors, brush the stone Sierra peaks, slip seaward, and like dawn wash timeless sky above Tonggou.

I ascend a garden wall; there is a pool beside which grow magnolia trees and cherry trees, a house with a roof of green tiles. Ling Maliang emerges from this house. She carries a bowl along the stone path to the pool. Her face is moon-round and serene, and her belly is round with child. Ling Maliang kneels before a man to whom she offers her bowl. He grasps it with thin hands, which appear even thinner because his fingernails are long and thin and tapered. This bowl contains rice, upon which lie many tiny, silvery fish. □

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

# And Then the Whining Schoolboy, with His Satchel

S. J. Perelman



**A**t four o'clock of a late February afternoon in 1919, an icicle four feet long depending from the nose of Sultan Abdul-Hamid II, the potentate whose granite countenance graced the facade of the Turk's Head Building in Providence, cascaded four stories to the sidewalk below, narrowly missing Morris Schreiber, an insurance salesman who was hurrying at that moment to sell Azouf Harootunian, the manager of the Weybosset Market, an accident policy. In the barbershop of the Crown Hotel, simultaneously, Walt Zymchuck, in charge of the second chair, was lathering Edward Gipf, a retired jewelry executive, when, because of the intense cold, the Bakelite handle of his shaving brush broke off and lodged a soapy pellicle of badger hair in his client's throat, occasioning momentary strangulation. Less than twenty minutes later, the accumulation of frozen snow on the roof of Cherry & Webb's specialty shop on Westminster Street caused a skylight to buckle in such wise that icy drafts whipped down an interior wall. A family of mice domiciled there scampered into the corset department, and in the resultant stampede Mrs. Anna Rubashkin of Central Falls suffered a number of contusions from splintered whalebone.

While these and similar human-interest stories were breaking all over Providence in what was inevitably described as the worst freeze in weather annals, another event, far more epochal from my point of view, was about to occur in the city. On Exchange Place, the municipal mall dominated by an equestrian statue of General Ambrose Burnside, stood a popular tearoom and soda fountain—an Elysian temple of goodies which, to avoid any imputation that it was run by Greeks, bore the prosaic name of Gibson's. So seductive was the ambrosial smell of its cakes, pies, cookies, twists, and rings, its chocolates, caramels, mints, and nougats, and the syrups and garnishes employed in its parfaits, smashes, cabinets, and banana splits that travelers had been known to leap from trains passing through the Union Station, three blocks away, and squander their patrimony there with no thought for the morrow. Five or six years earlier, indeed, a stockroom clerk at the Pussy Willow Ruching Corporation, famed throughout New England for feminine neckwear, had embezzled a quantity of jabots, altered the labels on their boxes, and sold them to unsuspecting French Canadians as sabots. Since the offender had spent the entire proceeds on brownies, eclairs, and macaroons at Gibson's and lapsed into a state of

coma, the judge, a compassionate man with a sweet tooth, tempered justice with mercy and remitted the sentence.

It was to the foregoing establishment, then, that I had been invited that afternoon for a rendezvous with a lady a dozen years my senior—a situation that, considering I was a raw youth, might suggest the sort of liaison popularized by Colette or Arthur Schnitzler. Actually, the inception of the meeting was quite innocent. Just as our sophomore English class at high school was dispersing that morning, the teacher, Miss Cronjager, summoned me to her desk. Over the weekend, it emerged, she had been grading some compositions of an autobiographical nature submitted by the class, and she felt that mine needed clarification. “I was originally going to discuss it with you in my office,” she said, “but on second thought it might be better if we did so in a less constrained atmosphere. I have an errand or two not far from Gibson’s, so let’s you and I meet there for a nice cup of tea and a chat.”

Inasmuch as Miss Cronjager had honey-colored hair and a figure evocative of the coryphées portrayed in cigarette pictures, I saw no reason to gag at the proposal and turned up well ahead of time. Before long I began salivating as waitresses ran to and fro bearing charlotte russes, schnecken, and gooseberry tarts to the women shoppers about me; at last, tortured by the rich aroma of hot chocolate and spicy fruitcake, my willpower collapsed, and I ordered a portion of jelly roll and a coffee float. The question of payment for the snack did not concern me. After all, I reasoned, since Miss Cronjager had initiated the conference, it was her obligation to pick up the tab.

Half an hour passed without any sign of Miss Cronjager, and fearful that the management might deem me a stiff loitering in the premises to keep warm, I ordered a butterscotch ice cream soda and a slice of angel cake topped with hazelnuts and chocolate sauce. What with the surrounding turbulence I succeeded in remaining persona grata for another thirty minutes, but then panic overtook me. My repast thus far totaled one dollar and eighty-five cents, and all I had on me was my carfare home. Fantasies began multiplying wherein Miss Cronjager had broken an ankle en route or been run down by a streetcar. The consequences—a hullabaloo of exposure, arrest, arraignment in juvenile court—were too horrid to contemplate. Moreover, and as if to intensify my qualms, a busboy materialized and polished the table to a high gloss while the manager, arms folded behind his cash register, surveyed me menacingly.



Luckily, before I could throw myself at his feet and plead for mercy, Miss Cronjager appeared, flushed and rosy from the biting cold. She was wearing a Russian pony coat, and every woman in the place immediately turned sick with hatred.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting," she apologized. "You should have had something to eat." I mumbled some gallantry of a Spartan nature, which she brushed aside. "No, no—order some cinnamon toast or buns, whatever you'd like. I'll just have tea." Feigning elaborate reluctance, I studied the menu, torn between mocha layer cake and a walnut sundae with ladyfingers. Rather than be categorized as a glutton, however, I checked myself and settled for an eight inch segment of poppyseed strudel and a vanilla freeze.

"Now then," Miss Cronjager began as lethargy from an excess of carbohydrates stole over me, "very likely you wonder why I chose to hold our discussion here instead of at school. The reason is that the essay you wrote about your past . . ." She hesitated. "Well, it raised some personal questions that I felt could be better answered in a heart-to-heart talk."

My pulse skipped a beat, a hot blush rose to the roots of my hair, and a mixture of anxiety and guilt churned in my breast. Had I unwittingly divulged some dark corner of my psyche, visible only to an adult? Had Miss Cronjager, reading between the lines, sensed with her feminine intuition the fantasies I sometimes cherished about her, particularly before falling asleep?

"Eh—sure, Miss Cronjager," I said. "What would you like to know?"

She reached under her chair and withdrew my theme from a briefcase. "Well, let's go over it in detail. Your earliest boyhood memory, you say, was of a village on the rocky, fogbound coast of Maine, of rough but kindly fishermen hauling lobster pots and mending their nets. Occasionally, when they voyaged to the Grand Banks in their schooners, they took you along, because you recall men in dories detaching codfish from hand lines. Now, on one of these voyages you made the acquaintance of an English lad, who had accidentally fallen off a transatlantic liner and been rescued by your vessel, with whom you became fast friends. Tell me," she broke off, "did you ever read a book by Rudyard Kipling called *Captains Courageous*?"

"Not that I remember," I said. "Why?"

"Oh, I was just curious," she said. "One other point. Not far from the village, you state, there was an isolated tavern named the Ad-

miral Benbow Inn, frequented by suspicious characters who clinked gold coins when they roistered and sang nautical chanteys. Together with the boy whose mother ran the tavern—his name, you believe, was Hawkins—you hid in an apple barrel and ascertained that these men were mutineers. How large was this barrel that it could accommodate two boys?"

"It was more of a keg—a hogshead, like, with iron hoops," I explained. "They used them for rum and molasses, too. The inside was real sticky."

"'Sticky' is a good description," agreed Miss Cronjager. "I felt that when I read the passage. All right, we come next to the stage in your narrative where your folks have moved to a cotton plantation in Dixie. Your account of their huge pillared mansion, with a family retainer named Uncle Cudgo, Southern belles waltzing with their escorts, and fieldhands strumming banjos, is very colorful, but you neglect to mention where the money for all this came from. I was under the impression that your parents' livelihood derived from catching finny denizens."

"It came about through a legacy, I believe," I said. "I remember a lawyer bringing us some stocks and bonds in a hamper, but I was too young to understand."

"Besides, you were rebellious," she reminded me. "As you point out, you soon tired of all the fussing, the endless coddling of nurses and tutors, and you ran away to the Texas Panhandle, to live the life of a cowboy. You must have been the youngest cowhand in the West at that time."

I nodded. "I was, but if you read *Riders of the Purple Sage* or *The Winning of Barbara Worth*, there were lots of young fellows seeking their fortunes out there. I mean, it was the frontier, and it took plenty of vim to rope and tie the dogies, brand the mavericks, and stave off attacks of the marauding red man."

"From which you didn't flinch one iota, I'm sure," she said warmly. "Was that how you became a rustler?"

"A rustler?" I repeated. "Not a rustler, Miss Cronjager—a wrestler. You see, the family objected to my life on the range and packed me off to Lawrenceville, where I made the varsity team and hung around with ginks like your Doc Macnooder, the Tennessee Shad, and so forth."

"What a privilege to have known those fabled characters of Owen Johnson's personally, rather than through the printed page like the

rest of us," she observed enviously. "However, at that juncture, I confess, I was mystified. Why didn't you go on to Yale thereafter?"

"Gee, I thought I made that clear," I said. "Dink Stover was the big man on campus there, and I was afraid that our rivalry—well, I hate to say it . . ."

"No, go on," she urged. "You're much too self-effacing."

"I felt there wasn't room for us both," I said. "And besides, I had those two projects I couldn't decide between."

"Oh yes, I forgot." She consulted my pages. "Whether to track down the insidious Dr. Fu Manchu or to join Allan Quatermain in the Mountains of the Moon. You really were on the horns of a dilemma, weren't you?"

"Worse than that," I said. "The Yukon was calling, too, and the South Seas. One minute I saw myself skimming over the frozen wastes in a dogsled driven by some laconic sourdough; the next, I was piloting a longboat manned by seven bronzed Kanakas through the surf at Rarotonga."

"Now, that's the part of your reminiscences that puzzled me most," said Miss Cronjager. "With all these clashing impulses, what finally brought you back to Providence and the Classical High School? For one whose history is so colorful, don't you find existence here a bit prosaic—humdrum, in fact?"

"Well, it's not as exciting as some places," I admitted. "I remember one time when I was a supercargo aboard a Swedish tramp bound from Mombasa to Tientsin. It was typhoon weather in the South China Sea, and we were scudding along under bare poles—"

"Wait a minute," she interrupted. "When did this take place? There's no indication here that you ever shipped before the mast."

"Look, Miss Cronjager," I expostulated. "When you assigned us this subject, you said to make it brief—to just emphasize the salient points. If I put down all the adventures I've had, it would read like *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments*."

"It does even now," she said. "That in a way is what I'm driving at. Tell me, how old are you?"

I replied that I had recently celebrated my fifteenth birthday.

"Well, you certainly have led a life jam-packed with incident. And," she added, with an enigmatic smile, "you've managed to squeeze in quite a lot of reading, haven't you?"

Stupefied though I was by my sugar intake, some instinct warned me at that moment that the question was loaded, and in a flash the truth dawned on me. In my innocence, I had accepted the teacher-

pupil relationship at face value, only to fall victim to the third degree. Miss Cronjager, for all her silken benevolence, sought to trap me into admitting that my past was a tissue of falsehoods—a collage, or mosaic, of the great books that had enriched my youth. Instantly, I was on the qui vive. In the next breath, this woman might very well demolish me with charges of plagiarism, forever ruin my credibility. Luckily, if the hours I had spent with Leatherstocking, with Sax Rohmer's Nayland Smith, and with Craig Kennedy, the Scientific Detective, had taught me nothing else, they had honed my sense of caution to razor sharpness. I had learned that destruction lurked behind the snap of a twig in the forest path, that a trifling cigarette ash could doom even the most cunning individual and bring his house of cards crashing down on his head. It may seem incredible that a mere fifteen-year-old should be capable of so complex a chain of reasoning, yet it hurtled through my mind with the speed of an express train, and in the next instant my foil parried Miss Cronjager's thrust with lightning swordsmanship.

"Why yes," I returned, my lips curving in the exact Oriental smile that Sydney Greenstreet was to popularize several decades later. "I occasionally like to while away the idle hour with a book, as who does not? However," I went on, rising, "I fear I detain you. If you have no further questions, Miss Cronjager, it is incumbent on me to scoot. The Y.M.C.A. gymnastics team, which I captain, is competing tonight for the Horace Dooley silver cup, and I must insure that everything in the way of sweatshirts and similar gear is in apple pie order."

Had Miss Cronjager known that far from being captain, or even a member, of any gymnastics team, I could not vault over a sawhorse without sustaining multiple fractures, I would not have escaped so easily. For whatever reason, though—possibly out of sheer ennui—she interposed no objection, and I beat a hasty retreat. Several days later, I was chopfallen to discover that I had received a mark of D-minus for my handiwork. To this day I can think of no adequate explanation. Perhaps, aggrieved by the staggering bill she paid at Gibson's, Miss Cronjager revenged herself by flunking me—a disheartening instance of the Dickensian cruelty prevalent at that time in New England high schools. Nonetheless, and by what rare gift of forbearance in my makeup I cannot say, I never bore her a grudge. Maybe it was that stern upbringing in the Maine fisheries, mellowed by plantation life in the old South and matured at Lawrenceville and in the South Seas, that made me incapable of

vindictiveness. Or maybe it was that honey-colored hair and exquisite figure I still remember, particularly before falling asleep. *Quién sabe?*

### **SOLUTION TO THE NOVEMBER "UNSOLVED":**

The traitor was Oliver Hertz, code name Parrot, posing as a chemist and stationed in Warsaw. Needless to say, the Parrot is telling no more secrets.

| NAME          | CODE   | COVER   | CITY   |
|---------------|--------|---------|--------|
| Kathy Jones   | Thrush | banker  | Vienna |
| Laura Green   | Raven  | artist  | Yemen  |
| Martin Finney | Stork  | doctor  | Ulster |
| Nathan Immel  | Quail  | editor  | Zagreb |
| Oliver Hertz  | Parrot | chemist | Warsaw |

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**I**f you like legal thrillers for the great law stuff, pick up Kate Wilhelm's latest, **Malice Prepense** (St. Martin's, \$24.95). Barbara Holloway and her father, defense attorneys in Oregon, take on as clients a wealthy family whose retarded adult son is a suspect in the murder of a state senator. When the police investigation turns instead to the young man's father, it is clear that the Holloways have their work cut out for them. The suspense builds as Barbara investigates two similar murders and as her team tries to convince the pro-prosecution judge to allow it to present its case fully. There are great courtroom scenes, outdoor action, and even a budding romance for the widowed Barbara. Wilhelm is definitely guilty of writing a book impossible to put down.

Carol O'Connell continues her much-touted series featuring New York City homicide sergeant Kathleen Mallory in **Killing Critics** (Putnam, \$23.95), and it's a dilly. The murder of a second-rate artist at a gallery gala is initially perceived as "performance art," but when it's followed by more mayhem, Mallory is certain that it is tied to an old double homicide, one of her late father's cases when he was head detective. This third Mallory novel is breathtaking in the cleverness of its plot and the sophisticated psychology of its characters. The end is a stunner, too.

Teal Stewart is a highly paid financial expert at a prestigious Boston firm and the hero of J. Dayne Lamb's **Unquestioned Loyalty** (Kensington, \$4.99). As she doggedly climbs the corporate ladder to a partnership at her firm, she's caught up in a web of fiscal finaglings, office politics, and murderous power plays. Beginning with the apparent bludgeoning death of a familiar local street character outside her office building, events escalate. But how are they

connected, these deaths and attempted murder? You'll need a scorecard to separate the petty office schemers from the killer, and even Teal has to go back decades to connect the final dots in the picture of a coldblooded murderer. This insider's look into the high-powered corporate culture is scary even without the shadow of a murderer!

Fred Vickery may be seventy-three and have a dicky heart, but that isn't going to stop him when the chips are down. And when a member of his family is the prime suspect in a murder in his small Colorado town, Fred is going to hike up his trousers, ignore the sheriff's warnings to keep out of the investigation, and turn a deaf ear to his daughter's nagging about his health. His beloved wife Phoebe (rest her soul) would have agreed with him: Fred just has to butt into the sheriff's business and make sure that justice is done. Such is the setup in Sherry Lewis' **No Place for Death** (Berkley, \$5.99), and it's as tart and refreshing as a tall glass of lemonade on a scorcher of a day.

In *Closet*, Lambda Award-winning author R. D. Zimmerman introduced gay TV reporter Todd Mills, a man forced out of the closet when his lover is murdered. Now there's **Tribe** (Dell, \$5.50), which hammers across the page and drills right into the reader's consciousness. As the suspense builds, the plot twists into a dark ribbon of lies and fear and denial that stretches all the way back to Todd's college days, knotting him irrevocably to an old friend, an old enemy, and a deadly pair of fundamentalists. *Tribe* has it all: a smashing plot, heart-tugging characters, and an emotionally satisfying conclusion.

Virginia Lanier's **Death in Bloodhound Red** (Harper, \$5.99) brings back Jo Beth Sidden, a fiercely independent woman in rural Georgia who owns and runs her own business breeding and training bloodhounds. This isn't another cute series with anthropomorphic pets as sleuthing sidekicks. Jo Beth's dogs are hardworking and well-trained, but they are still dogs. Jo Beth, on the other hand, has enough personality for a whole kennel of canines. She's abrasive, funny, stubborn, and tough. She's got a past that has yet to reveal itself fully, even to her, and she's got a lucrative but sweaty job on call for the surrounding law enforcement officials as a tracker: That can mean a lost child or a deadly chase after three murderous escaped convicts. This is a long book, rich as molasses, full of hound lore, action vignettes, and a fling at romance.

Spenser fans should appreciate Robert B. Parker's latest in pa-



perback, **Thin Air** (Berkley, \$6.99), but be prepared to view the case from the kidnap victim's point of view as well as through the detective's snappy narrative. Frank Belson is a cop and long-running series character, an honest, middle-aged guy who generally lands on Spenser's side in a bureaucratic fray. Frank is in the first year of his second marriage, and his bride is a much younger woman; when she disappears, he's not certain that she hasn't simply left him. So Belson becomes Spenser's client. I'm not giving anything away to reveal that Lisa Belson has been kidnapped by a certified sociopath, a gang leader with whom she had shared a steamy fling long before she met her husband. As Belson fights for his life in a hospital bed, Spenser and a cohort (a stand-in for Hawk in this caper) must turn over all the rocks in Lisa's past to locate her. Then they have to figure out a way to free her. Intense and fast-paced reading.

James Lee Burke's **Cadillac Jukebox** (Hyperion, \$22.95) will please fans of his Dave Robicheaux series and should provide a fine excuse for others to discover this tough Louisiana sheriff. As always, Burke weaves a tangled plot with many colorful threads: an escaped redneck murderer with a vendetta; a boyhood friend who's long since turned to larger crimes than the one he perpetrated on young Dave; a former lover who's now threatening Dave's marriage; and a wealthy and popular Southern scion who's running for governor of the state. This novel, as always, is exquisitely written and filled with larger than life characters and heart-stopping action scenes that are in high contrast to the small comforts of Dave's own fishing shack, time spent with his adopted daughter, and his laconic way of pursuing his own investigation.

A duo writing under the pen name Margaret Frazer continues its popular medieval mystery series with **The Murderer's Tale** (Berkley, \$5.99). Our heroine, Sister Frevisse, leaves the cloister in the company of another nun to combine a bit of convent business with a pilgrimage. From the beginning the reader is privy to the murderous thoughts of one of their fellow travelers. The suspense (if you don't read the jacket blurb!) comes from an unexpected twist that appears to be part of a perfect crime, one that threatens to imprison an innocent man while the culprit literally gets away with murder. The period detail is lavish, and the characters are full-blooded in this sixth book in an exceptionally strong series.

# THE STORY THAT WON

The July Mysterious Photo-John Heiden of San Jacinto, tions go to A. K. Duke of Sea-Besnard of Irvine, California; Alberta, Canada; Scott Pe-Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Aptos, California; Brent ish Columbia, Canada; Cecile B. Huling of Simi Valley, California; David Magnus-son of Hialeah, Florida; and Mary Hallman of Monahans, Texas.



graph contest was won by California. Honorable men-side, California; John F. Barry Baldwin of Calgary, ters of Hebron, Maryland; Michigan; Brian Spencer of Knowles of Chetwynd, Brit-ish Columbia, Canada; Cecile B. Huling of Simi Valley, California; David Magnus-son of Hialeah, Florida; and Mary Hallman of Monahans, Texas.

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

## TIME OUT by John Heiden

According to Diamond Lane Eddie, successful bank heists depended on speed. Therefore, he took three lookalike hostages mainly to escape via the freeway Diamond Lane. Also, the police probably wouldn't shoot into a car full of lookalikes. Besides, he needed them to carry the loot-laden attaché cases.

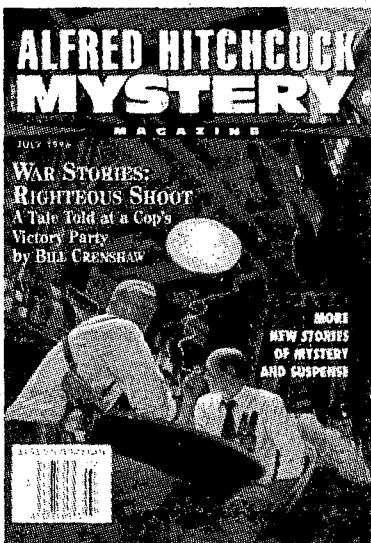
Today, however, Eddie would learn the importance of timing because his caper coincided with the start of Mayor Freendorkel's Clean Sweep election victory parade. This included a decorated street sweeper pulling a bandwagon with Police Detective Thugelfloont's Fifth Precinct band on board. Unfortunately, the bandwagon was parked against Eddie's front bumper.

Eddie's bank departure amid shouts, shots, and alarms startled the sweeper driver into momentarily reversing his vehicle, which then locked Eddie's bumper to the bandwagon. Detective Thugelfloont mistook this as his cue to strike up the band, and Mayor Freendorkel's parade started rolling with Eddie's getaway car in tow at three miles per hour.

Seeing this, Eddie sought anonymity among the onlookers but was prevented by his hostages, who chose following Eddie over returning to work. Trapped, Eddie climbed onto the bandwagon and surrendered to Detective Thugelfloont. Simultaneously the sweeper made one of those sudden turns we're warned about, and the getaway car broke loose, whereupon the hostages jumped in and drove away.

Handcuffed between two sousaphones, Eddie's free time expired as he watched *his* hostages joyriding in *his* car with *his* loot toward *his* Diamond Lane. Perversely, the band played "Ain't We Got Fun?"

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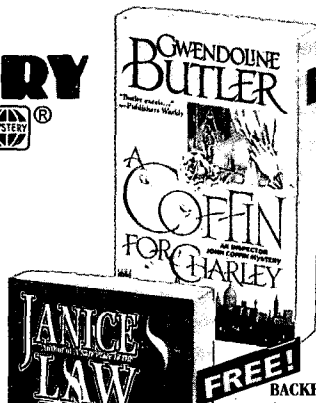
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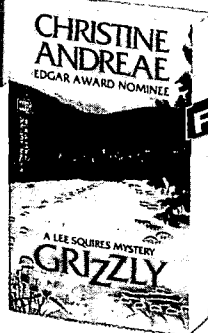
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